Chapter 14

REFLECTIVE LEARNING IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Reflective learning provides a learning experience for students to record and reflect deeply on their thoughts and feelings on issues and events that are an essential part of their learning. In a discourse of face-to-face teaching and learning, students and lecturers have opportunities to interact in class and in individual conferencing. It is often assumed that on-line learning can deprive students of personal interaction to share ideas and experiences with their lecturers. However, this chapter points out that computer technology can greatly enhance reflective learning. This chapter examines the concept of reflective learning with a focus on the learning journal. It presents different types of journal writing in reflective learning and discusses the implementation of reflective learning in a university online course.

Key words: reflective learning, online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Journal writing is an intentional reflective design strategy that can be used to augment the traditional face-to-face learning environment. Journal writing is designed to facilitate the integration of what often can be purely academic work. Its application online adds another dimension to it by promoting communication, creation of meaning and multiple dialogues, enhancing the development of insight, and promoting cognitive awareness and critical thinking (Henderson & Monteiro, 2004).

Journal writing plays an important role in teaching and learning. In primary schools, children are given opportunities to write about their experiences such as activities with their family on the weekend, a trip to another city, or a visit to the zoo. The main aim of journal writing for young children is to promote literacy development. Children learn reading by reading and they learn writing by writing. Journal writing is the first step for children to present their experiences in written words. It is hard for them to write about things that have nothing to do with their existence.

Recently the interest in journal writing in education has been rekindled. Its role in learning has been the interest of educators for a long time. Dewey (1938), the father of experiential education, was among the early writers who emphasized the significance of reflection in learning. In his view, individual growth and social values develop together. Individuals achieve their individuality in cooperatively striving with other individuals, and in communicating with other individuals. The private world grows out of the public domain when personal understanding emerges from shared communication. Journal writing is a genre of reflection which enables students to share their inner world with significant others. It is important in teaching and learning as journal writing encourages students to express their world views through their own lenses.

JOURNAL WRITING AS REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Learning is probably one of the most common words in the educator's vocabulary. However its meaning has been the centre of academic debates for many years. From the knowledge transmission perspective, learning is supposed to result in the gaining of new knowledge and skills. The process of obtaining knowledge involves knowledge givers and knowledge receivers. In a classroom discourse, teachers are knowledge givers who decide what knowledge should be transmitted to students. In this learning perspective, assessment and testing are important in teaching and learning as students need to be assessed to ensure that transmission of knowledge flows well from teachers to students. When learning is viewed in this way, there are few opportunities for learners to use their experiences to make sense of knowledge. Reflection rarely occurs and when it does it is often used only for certain learning tasks such as structured question-answer exercises and for summary of information rather than to promote critical thinking.

The emergence of more active learning programs has given reflective learning a focus in current education. Learning involves a wide range of human development in the social, cognitive, and affective domains. Knowledge is important, but the key factor in teaching and learning is the way in which learners make sense of knowledge. Learning is viewed as a meaning making process. In order to facilitate meaning making, learners are given opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings about objects, issues, or events in the world. They are also encouraged to reflect on their learning experiences through diary, journal writing, and discussion. Reflective learning is not a simple task. According to Roger (2001), it is a cognitive process which has the following features:

- Individuals are actively engaged in the task;
- Reflection is triggered by interesting, strange or perplexing situations or experiences;
- Individuals re-examine their assumptions, presuppositions, and world view;

- Individuals develop new understanding as the result of reflection.

Children and adults are often engaged in reflective thinking. It can be a brief thought or a long deep reflection. For instance, a child was fascinated by seeing a dolphin jump through a hoop. This experience impressed her and she was curious with the following passing thoughts:

- Why was the dolphin so clever?
- Why did the trainer feed the dolphin with a small fish now and then?
- Do dolphins understand English?

In face-to-face interaction, learners can share those questions with others such as parents, teachers, and peers. As Boud et al. (1985) argue, reflection in terms of learning designates intellectual and affective activities in which learners explore their experiences in order to develop new understandings and appreciations.

With the rapid development of computer technology, online learning has become a new discourse of learning in which learners are not strictly bound to the structural conditions of a traditional classroom. In a virtual discourse of learning, learners interact with their teachers and peers through online discussion, email communication, and courseware. Students can take time to reflect with e-text. Reflective journal writing can be greatly facilitated by e-communication resources.

TYPES OF JOURNAL WRITING

A learning journal is metaphorically a mirror on which learners reveal their thoughts and feelings as a form of monologue and dialogue. In online learning, reflective journals can be divided into four types in terms of cognitive functions:

- Event-orientated journal;
- Meditative reflective journal;
- Critical reflective journal;
- Conferencing journal.

EVENT-ORIENTATED JOURNALS

Students record daily events that require their attention or action. It can be personal or interpersonal. For example, students record their search and findings on the Web or their preparation for essay writing. This is not strictly about events and dates. Students may include in the journal their thoughts and feelings associated with those events. Here is an example of an event-orientated journal entry:

> On Sunday May 28, I spent three hours searching for articles on cultural aspects of health for my next assignment. I used two search strategies: Google search and e-journals in our university library. I found a lot of papers but most of them were commercial stuff!

Occasionally I found some interesting research papers published in conference proceedings or personal web sites. I used key words such as migrants and health, culture and health, ethnics, culture and health. First I did not know that bioethics was an academic branch dealing with issues mutually relating to health, biology and philosophy. The e-journals available on our library web site are very useful. I will spend more time going through the listed journals.

This entry is reflective and event-orientated because it is a reflection of what happened in relation to a specific event:

- Searching articles in a library;
- Using search tools;
- Obtaining online materials;
- Searching online e-journals.

The journal sample also signals the following learning experiences:
- Working with two tools to find out how useful they were;
- Distinguishing useful materials from the bad ones;
- Learning a new academic field: bioethics;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of e-journals.

Herrington and Oliver (2002) point out that reflective practice is the cultivation of the capacity to reflect on action while doing something, and to reflect on action after it has been done. The reflection utilizes prior knowledge and focuses on constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing knowledge based on new experiences provided by the event.

MEDITATIVE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

In the present context, the word meditative does not have any religious connotation or images of a monk chanting while meditating under a tree. Descartes (1992), known as 'the father of modern philosophy' wrote the *Meditations* as a philosophical text. Meditation here designates the idea of the philosopher as one who discovers truths by thinking very deeply. In literacy education, Moffett (1968), a well-known author whose book *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* is widely read and cited throughout the English-teaching world, sets out the theory and research that has had a great impact on literacy education. Moffett (1983) treats reading and writing as meditation. Similarly Lê (1984) argues that reading is a cognitive and meditative process in which learners allow their thoughts and feelings to flow with words.

In meditative reflective writing, the goal is not a finished product with polished expressions and logical structure. The process itself is the goal of writing. The mind explores freely the inner world without conditions and expectations. It allows thoughts and feelings to flow in whatever direction they want to. However, it is not absent-minded writing behavior, because cognitively it can be very active consciously and unconsciously.

With the aid of computer, meditative reflective writing can flow fluently, allowing learners to be fully immersed in the process of writing, thinking and feeling. It enables learners to record thoughts in words without editing. Fundamentally it is a meaning making process.

CRITICAL REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Critical reflective writing is a highly intellectual process that involves hypothesis building, theorizing, and problem solving. In critical reflective writing, learners do not take things for granted, rather they reflect deeply about their experiences, question events, or challenge accepted views and ideas. For example, a student writes about her thoughts on the cultural shock that she personally experienced as a visitor in a foreign country. Instead of merely describing her cultural shock experience in journal writing, she may interpret her experience in terms of the relationship between theory and practice and cultural context of teaching and learning. In narrative research, journal writing is a powerful data source as each treats personal notes, stories, and instances of living as powerful data. Here is a sample of critical reflective journal:

> When I read an article dealing with 'cultural shock', it reminds me of my first experience of teaching English in a developing country. I expected that different countries have different ways of living such as eating habits, clothing, conversation, and friendship. But I was very shocked when I entered a classroom where my mission was to enhance active learning. The room was empty and uninviting. Children sat in rows and there was no room for them to move around. The room was hot, crowded and had no teaching resources. I brought along many teaching ideas about interactive learning, collaboration, interaction, constructivism, etc. but my initial enthusiasm suddenly disappeared. I started to question what I had learned about learner-centered teaching, flexible learning, and interactive learning: Do they work in this uninviting context? Are these ideas too remote from this learning environment? Where should I go from here? Abandoning idealistic views to survive? Giving it a go? What am I doing here?

Critical reflective journal is important in online teaching and learning as it promotes growth in thinking and feeling and in the above sample it reconciles the personal identity with the professional identity and raises the issue of translating theory into the real world. Human lives are woven of personal stories and events. Individuals construct their identities through their own and others' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thus, journal writing is a linguistic representation of human experiences.

CONFERENCING JOURNAL

Holding an online forum or conference can provide the opportunity for discussion and reflection. While there is a flow of discussion and it is linear, it is not subject to the tyranny of the ever present now of the face-to-face classroom that does not allow the participants the benefit of an instant replay. Online discussion board allows as many replays as a participant wants of what was said. A discussion can be revisited and commented on as long as the forum is open, while in a classroom, often the moment is lost and it is difficult to revisit (Markel, 2001). In a face-to-face class discussion, teachers are discussion initiators and leaders. They control the flow of the discussion and in many cases dictate who can participate. Generally in a tutorial or seminar, only a few vocal students participate actively in a discussion and other students are passive listeners. Immediate responding in a face-to-face context does not work

well with many students, particularly with those who need time to respond. Online conferencing promotes interactive communication. It can be used as a reflective journal which gives students time to think and search for information to support their reflection on others' views as well as their own.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

The rest of this chapter discusses a case of a learning experience in which four types of learning journal were introduced in a course. An online unit on second language learning was offered to postgraduate students in the Faculty of Education. The unit was conducted entirely on the Internet. The Web and email were the two main tools for communicative interaction. Students were expected to participate in the following online activities: learning log, student-teacher conferencing via email, and web-based discussion.

LEARNING LOG

A learning log is a form of personal learning diary in which students take notes of anything in their own learning experiences which trigger their thoughts and feelings. Students are aware that their learning logs will be submitted to the lecturer as a learning portfolio later in the course. The lecturer will give feedback on the basis of sharing and appreciation, not on what is right or wrong. The following items might be appropriate entries in a learning log:

- The readings that the students have completed;
- The student's views and opinions on the readings;
- The hyperlinks they have followed;
- Any helpful resources they have found;
- New concepts;
- Glossary of new terms and examples of their use.

Here is a sample of a note in a learning log:

> I started to keep a journal as part of the process and I surprisingly find that my ideas are a lot better structured in this – I wonder if I'm just allowing myself to be overwhelmed by the thought of 'Writing An Essay'? Do other students have problems starting, too? I seem to start plotting an essay plan and then get stuck …

Although students are free to include anything that is of interest to them in their reflective journal, a list of items is suggested in case they are not familiar with a learning log and need some guidance. For example:

- When you read an article or a book chapter, pick out several issues that are of interest to you and give your thoughts and feelings about those issues.

- When you watch TV, read a newspaper, talk to a friend, there are a number of issues that inspire, puzzle, or confuse you.
- You may want to reflect on how your learning in this course has progressed so far.
- Keep a small notebook called '*I wonder why?*'. Each time you come across an interesting thing that puzzles you, please write it down in your notebook. For example:

> I wonder why young children pick up a second language so quickly but adults tend to struggle with it. I wonder why regional dialects are not strong in Australia. I find it hard to distinguish Sydney speakers from Melbourne speakers; whereas I can recognize speakers of various parts of Great Britain. I wonder why singers do not sing with an accent but when they speak, their accent is so strong.

A learning log is an important source of reflective learning. Students learn how to develop and monitor their learning by incorporating various materials into their own resources. This is not a simple task for some learners as they need time and skills to become active log writers. Students can construct their learning log electronically and share their learning log in progress with the teacher when they wish.

EMAIL CONFERENCING

Email has become one of the most widely used tools for communication in tertiary education. At the primary school level, the use of email in learning has also begun to increase. It is not an over-statement to conclude that email has taken over face-to-face interaction between lecturers and students. It is impractical and impossible for a lecturer teaching over 200 students in different classes to have face-to-face conferencing with every individual student. Students no longer need to make an appointment for a face-to-face meeting or to queue up for just a brief encounter with their lecturers. Email conferencing between students and teachers consists of three main functions: procedural, social, and cognitive.

Procedural function

Email conferencing of procedural function covers various management aspects of teaching and learning. For example students write to make a request, and seek information or clarification about certain procedures such as an extension of an assignment due date, learning schedule, essay referencing, and textbooks.

- I would like to read an article you mentioned last time. Could you send it to me by email attachment! Thanks for your help.
- I'm a bit confused, not sure whether the APA referencing system and Harvard system are the same. Could you clarify this for me? Thanks!
- Is it possible for me to submit the first assignment one week late? I have not been well and need time to catch up.

Social function

Email conferencing of social function is primarily about interpersonal relationships. Its main aim is to express our interest in others as social beings. Expression of social functions include greetings and inquiry about personal matters. This function is very important in online teaching and learning as students and teachers need to know one another in order for them to share their thoughts and feelings in a virtual learning discourse.

> How are you? Today I have just come back from Sydney. It was a great trip. I managed to visit two friends at the Sydney University. I enjoyed the trip very much. I hope you are in good health. Are you on holiday at the moment? It is cold here in Canada. I don't mind the cold weather. Do you have a lot of students in the course? Cheers.

Cognitive function

Email conferencing of cognitive function is about concepts, ideas, and problem solving. Its main aim is to satisfy an inquiring mind. Students individually email teachers to share their thoughts on issues that are dealt with in the course or relevant issues in the real world.

> I wonder whether we can meaningfully discuss the question of computer security without taking into account its social and cultural context. In some cultures, to maintain computer security is less important than to maintain social solidarity. Thus computer security can be compromised due to social expectation. What is your view on this?

As email conferencing is interpersonal communication, it is meaningful to accommodate these three functions of conferencing in teaching and learning. Procedural communication is helpful but a focus on this function is like keeping students under control rather than allowing students to use email conferencing to make sense of the world of learning with their teacher. Learning is strongly linked to students' personal experiences, which shape their world views.

WEB-BASED DISCUSSION

In a face-to-face class discussion, students are required to respond immediately to questions and answers provided by the teacher or other members of the discussion group. For some students, it is very difficult to give immediate feedback or comments. Whereas in web-based discussion, students are given time to think about the discussion topic. They may consult other sources to stimulate and support their reflective writing. Here are some samples of web-based discussion on the topic Grammar in Education.

> Participant 1: I am interested in the way teachers and students view grammar. Linguists often see grammar as being all-important, the 'heart' of language and whatnot; whereas students – because perhaps of previous bad experiences with language learning – see grammar as unavoidable but not necessarily connected to

communication. I've often had students saying 'I don't want to learn grammar. I want to learn to speak!' as though communication were possible without learning how to form sentences in e.g. the past tense.

Participant 2: In the past, we tended to focus so much on grammar in 'learning about language'. Students who know a lot about grammar may not be competent in speaking and writing. To me, learning language should be the primary aim in second language learning and learning about language is important in literacy education in first language learning. I am surprised that many students in English-speaking countries do not know grammar. When I was in primary and secondary schools, we did not learn grammar. Occasionally teachers mentioned verb, adjective and nouns but not much on grammar teaching. I am not sure my teachers then knew a lot about grammar. This could be the reason why they were not interested in teaching us …or grammar was not seen as important in literacy education. Now I wish we could have learned grammar in school.

CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the main types of journal writing and their functions in reflective learning. Journal writing plays an important role in teaching and learning. It has become an essential feature of communicative interaction that enhances learning as a meaning making process. With the rapid development of computer technology, the discourse of teaching and learning can be extended to students in remote regions of the world. Their communicative interaction is no longer confined to local participants. Online learning in this extended discourse has a multicultural dimension that is often absent in traditional face-to-face teaching.

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