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Editorial - Reflection for Learning in Higher Education

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Editorial - Reflection for Learning in Higher Education

Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice Reflection for Learning in Higher Education

Editorial

Dear Colleagues,

I am delighted and proud to introduce this special issue of the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* that focuses on Reflection for Learning in Higher Education. It is the outcome of six years of collaborative reflection, practice and research by many reflective practitioners who have undertaken systematic research to provide empirical evidence for the role of reflection in learning. Gratitude is expressed to our many colleagues who participated in constructive and supportive ways by engaging in the blind peer-review process for the papers that make up this issue. Their feedback has strengthened each of the papers and enabled us to move beyond peer-review to collegial peer learning.

Reflection for learning in higher education is recognised as a practice for enhancing and potentially deepening learning across the academy, nationally and internationally. It is a practice that has been widely adopted by hundreds of educational organisations globally (Coulson, Harvey, Winchester-Seeto & Mackaway 2010). It is valued for its potential in supporting the development of soft skills and graduate attributes that employers desire. Students are expected to practise reflection, and academics who design and teach the curriculum to have a practice knowledge to support learning through reflection in higher education. This special issue contributes to that knowledge. While reflective practice is common across many disciplines and modes – for example, learning through experience (or work-integrated learning) – conceptual understandings, and therefore learning and teaching practices, are at best inconsistent, make minimal reference to pedagogical theory and are undertaken in disciplinary silos.

The subject of this special issue is the theory and practice of reflection for learning, specifically in the context of higher education. We deliberately focus on the tertiary learner, for while books are being published with a focus on the teacher, it is difficult to locate publications focusing on learners. This special issue is one step toward redirecting pedagogical focus. The multi-disciplinary approach that frames this issue enables us to expand the boundaries of traditional reflective practice from those such as education and health sciences to the hard sciences, and to emerging adopters such as accounting and psychology. The papers that make up this issue provide a concerted effort to broaden an interdisciplinary approach to investigating the role of reflection for learning.

Although the practice of *reflection for learning in higher education* is widespread, there exists a dearth of evidenced-based publications. Any teacher in higher education who works within a context where reflective practice is expected, or even required, will find that this special issue provides a compelling and research-based foundation and rationale for reflective practice.

The special issue is structured by two themes: current theoretical understandings and approaches to practice; and disciplinary philosophies and practices of reflective practice in higher education. The reader interested in learning in depth about reflection for learning is invited to read the special issue from cover to cover. Alternatively, the reader can select a paper that focuses on their contextual or disciplinary interest.

The special issue opens by presenting a theoretical model that articulates the key concepts and assumptions underpinning an ecological approach specifically for experiential learning and the tertiary sector. *Towards a Theory of the Ecology of Reflection* synthesises seminal, established and

contemporary research to provide empirical support for theoretical assumptions, as the authors' taken-for-granted truths, that underpin reflection for learning. The reader is invited to review these assumptions and judge whether they align with their own theoretical conceptualisations of reflective practice. This is a necessary starting point in a robust discourse around reflective practice and learning, as it provides a foundation of shared understandings from which to further develop our knowledge and inform our practice. To also achieve this shared understanding and ongoing research collaboration, key concepts are defined. The paper then proceeds to develop a new theoretical model of reflective practice for experiential learning in higher education. This process involves identifying the principle tenets and ecologies of the model: the learner, the learning ecology and the experiential learning ecology. The model works to broaden the thinking around reflective practice by challenging the conception of reflection as a purely cognitive process and arguing for a more holistic or whole-person learning approach.

A whole-person learning approach is a powerful theme throughout the second paper, *A Song and a Dance*, which argues the need to be inclusive and creative in practicing and documenting reflective practice. The reliance on text-based journals, or diaries, is challenged as the main form for both practicing and documenting reflection (Harvey et al. 2012). Enacting the principles of Universal Design is an approach that is advocated for achieving a more inclusive curriculum (Kerr & Baker 2013). One strategy for achieving this is to “disrupt” the text (deFreitas 2007) and our reliance on cognitive and text-based modes for reflection by moving towards offering a choice of diverse modes for practice and documentation. A diverse range of innovative and creative options for reflective practice is suggested, together with the research that supports each option's potential for enhancing learning and creativity. These modes span arts-based, embodied, mindful and technological approaches. The authors also extend an offer of free scholarly resources to support experimentation with different modes of practice.

The role of reflection for learning in both “hard” and “soft” subjects (Kreber & Castleden 2009) is the second theme to structure this special issue. Many of these subjects have an experiential or work-integrated learning focus. The reader can focus on their disciplinary area to learn about ways of practising reflection, as well as read and learn from the research, practice and philosophies of other disciplines. Disciplines may differ in the language they use to discuss reflection, and becoming familiar with these languages may enable cross-disciplinary collaborations.

In my academic role, I have heard and participated in many vigorous discussions about the relationship between reflective practice and the hard sciences. This relationship is explored by the author, scientist and philosopher who wrote *Synergies in Critical Reflective Practice and Science*, a paper that develops an argument of “science as reflection and reflection as science”. The paper provides a succinct outline of seminal theoretical models of critically reflective practice to arrive at a definition of critical reflection as “a practical implementation of epistemology, applied to conscious practices and processes that humans undertake” (Mathieson 2016). As the models of science are next presented, the synergies between critically reflective practice and science are tantalisingly revealed. These synergies suggest that the disciplines of education and science have much to learn from each other.

Moving to the discipline of psychology, the question is posed: Is there a role for reflective practice? In this paper the role of reflective practice is considered for its potential contribution to *Developing Psychological Literacy*. The complexity of psychological literacy is discussed before current references to reflective practice are identified across the research and practice of psychology. Drawing on data gained from the introduction of reflective practice into an undergraduate psychology subject, the authors generate strategies that support the effective introduction of reflective practice into the psychology curriculum and conclude with an argument for the role of reflection in developing capacity in psychological literacy.

The design, development and ongoing review of a new undergraduate subject for a school of medicine enabled a new “spiral” curriculum that embeds *Reflection in Medical Education*. A pedagogical rationale is presented for the value of developing reflective capacity in undergraduate students and within the medical community as a whole; indeed, professional bodies expect medical graduates to be reflective practitioners. Dimensions of a spiral curriculum, which allows for the scaffolding of reflective capacity, are defined. An authentic case example from Leeds University of how a spiral curriculum is practised is presented as a scholarly discussion, with student voices adding additional insights. Many thought-provoking questions are also raised about future directions for reflective practice, each of which can be pondered by teachers in any discipline.

Insights gained through a national project are shared in the paper *Reflection for Learning, Learning for Reflection: Developing Indigenous Competencies in Higher Education*. The research draws on multiple modes of documented reflections by students and academics who have engaged in service learning in and with Indigenous ecologies. These reflective modes range across digital storytelling, photography, journaling, video and audio. The coding of these artefacts reveals learners engaging with reflection at different levels. Learners’ reflective practice is shown to achieve greater understandings of community and a sense of connection with Australian Aboriginal students and organisational groups.

In a paper on *CreActive Accounting Education* the authors introduce the pedagogical philosophy and guiding principles of the Bauhaus School. A key tenet of ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ resonates with many of the arguments presented in the companion papers in this issue. After the development of professional workshops that allow participants to experientially learn about this approach, the concept of reflective unlearning was adopted as an innovative principle in the undergraduate accounting curriculum. The case example of a large cohort of undergraduate accounting students sees learners using an inquiry-based approach, in which reflection is embedded, to co-generate knowledge. It is argued that the outcome is learners who develop the capacity to be reflective, creative, critical and agile, all skills desired by their future workplaces.

Reflective practice supports learning, and in multiple disciplines. This learning can be by students, academics, professional staff, host supervisors and any member of the university and aligned communities. It is time to call for a paradigm shift. Do we dare to imagine tertiary campuses as places of reflective practice, of mindful and contemplative practices? As creative campuses? As an example, the University of Kent (2012) has built a labyrinth as a “teaching and learning resource across academic disciplines”. It is hoped that this special issue will contribute to thinking about the pedagogical possibilities.

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