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Reflection for learning, learning for reflection: Developing Indigenous competencies in higher education

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Abstract

Reflection is an essential part of students' critically reflective development within experiential-learning contexts; it is arguably even more important when working cross-culturally. This paper reports from a national, arts-based service-learning project in which students in creative arts, media and journalism, and pre-service teachers worked with Aboriginal people in urban and rural areas of Australia. The paper uses Ryan and Ryan's (2010) *4Rs model of reflective thinking* for reflective learning and assessment in higher education to ascertain the effectiveness of the project work toward engendering a reflective mindset. The paper discusses how students learned to engage in critical self-monitoring as they attended to their learning experiences, and it describes how they "wrote" their experiences and shaped their professional identities as they developed and refined the philosophy that related to their developing careers. Examples taken from the narratives of students, community partners and academic team members illustrate the principal finding, which is that through a process of guided reflection, students learned to reflect in three stages: a preliminary drawing out of existing attitudes and expectations; a midway focus on learning from and relating to past experiences; and a final focus on reciprocal learning, change and future practice. The three stages were apparent regardless of program duration. Thus, program phase rather than academic year level emerged as the most important consideration when designing the supports that promote and scaffold reflection.

Introduction

Reflection is an essential part of students' development within experiential-learning contexts; it is arguably even more important when working cross-culturally (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones 2011). This paper results from a national, arts-based service-learning project in which students from creative arts, media and journalism, and pre-service teachers, worked with Aboriginal people in urban and rural areas of Australia. Its focus is students' engagement with reflection.

The paper begins with a discussion of reflection and reflexivity, and then considers the development of Indigenous cultural awareness within a higher-education context. Having introduced the study approach, context and theoretical framework, the paper describes and discusses how students learned to engage in critical self-monitoring. We use examples taken from the narratives of students, community partners and academic team members to illustrate the principal finding, which is that reflection progressed through three stages: a preliminary drawing out of existing attitudes and expectations; a midway focus on learning from and relating to past experiences; and a final focus on reciprocal learning, change and future practice.

Reflection and Reflexivity

In framing this section of the paper, we are conscious that terms such as “critical reflection” and “reflexivity” have at times been used interchangeably (Pease & Fook 1999). Following the work of D’Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez (2007), we assert that it is important to demarcate the terms “reflection” and “reflexivity” by defining both.

To define reflexivity – how it is described as a practice; how it relates to critical reflection; and how it relates to the development of Indigenous competencies within a higher education context – we draw on D’Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez’s (2007) three types of reflexivity:

1. an ability or competency (Elliott 2001; Ferguson 2003) that focuses on individual responses to a given situation;
2. a critical approach to professional practice that involves scrutinising what we know and how we know, including formal knowledge and practice knowledge (Healey 2005; Sheppard et al. 2000); and
3. an approach that acknowledges the dynamic relationship between thoughts and feelings (Mills & Kleinmann 1988).

These three types are underpinned by Usher and Edwards’ notion (1994) that reflexive positions are instances of self-understanding and practice theories.

Reflection, in contrast, is the means by which inconsistencies between formal theories and practice theories are exposed. This paper focuses on critical reflection, which is in line with the current themed issue and with our focus on the personal rather than the positional. Critical reflection tends to value the practice wisdom of practitioners in that an incident generates either theory that is generalisable (Morley 2004) or theory that relates to the unique case (Schön 1971). Working as we do with creative practitioners, we are mindful that reflective practice (Schön 1983) has been long been adopted in practice-based education, and that rigorous critical reflective practice can be enabled through oral, auditory and bodily “triggers” (Barton & Ryan 2014). Such triggers reflect the multifarious ways of learning and experiencing that our students adopt, and they are central to our thinking and understanding.

To the extent that reflection forms a “bridge between theory and practice” (Mason 2014, p.169), it is an essential part of students’ critically reflective development within experiential-learning contexts. “Experiential learning” refers to a diverse range of experiences and settings including and beyond traditional work-integrated learning. As articulated by Billett (2011, p.2), the basis of our pedagogical and scholarly work concerns opportunities for students to “come to learn” what they will need for their professional practice:

the process whereby students come to learn through experiences in educational and practice settings and reconcile and integrate the contributions of those experiences to develop the understandings, procedures and dispositions, including the criticality and reflexivity, required for effective professional practice.

Reflection has been integral to the critical service-learning project featured in this paper. Reflection in our work provides a means by which students may “reconcile and integrate” their experiences and understandings (Billett 2011, p.2) and transform their dispositions and practices,

including their creative practices (Mason 2014). As Bringle, Hatcher and Jones (2011, p.127) have argued, such “ground-level engagement and dialogue as well as personal experience are important, even essential, research methodologies for cross-cultural work”.

The ability of reflection to promote transformative learning (Mezirow 1991), itself a feature of cross-cultural experiences, prompts the development of the socially informed, critically reflective practitioner (Thompson & Pascal 2011). This practitioner can be thought of as a rounded, adaptable, resilient and therefore effective professional who more fully satisfies university imperatives for graduates who “move smoothly and effectively into their selected occupational practice upon graduation” (Billett 2011, p. 1). Students’ understanding of intended careers and professions influences the ease of study-career transitions. When experienced within a cross-cultural setting, service learning or internship experiences contribute much-needed opportunities to reflect on and “explore the service orientation of the profession in a cross-cultural setting” (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones 2011, p.95). We note, in addition, that such opportunities can be as new for lecturers as they are for students. As Rice and Pollack point out, educators need to:

engage in our own work on an ongoing basis to unlearn the racist perspectives and behaviors we have been taught. Self-reflection on our own privilege and on the ways we have perpetuated a racist system is crucial in helping other White students engage in this work...it is also crucial for White faculty to recognize when we do not have the experiences or perspectives of students of color. (2012, p. 128)

Here, the cross-cultural context of the study within a participatory action research framework provided students and lecturers opportunities to simultaneously reflect on and through reflection (Ash et al. 2005) as participants in multiple communities. We hoped that that these reflections, as a critical service-learning initiative, would foster what Mitchell (2008 p. 54) has termed “a critical consciousness, allowing students [and ourselves] to combine action and reflection in classroom and community”.

Indigenous Cultural Awareness in Higher Education

In 2011, the *National Best Practice Framework for Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* outlined guiding principles for the development of cultural competency in five areas: university governance and management; graduate competency; culturally appropriate research; increased Indigenous staffing; and community engagement (Universities Australia 2011). The Framework (2011, p.3) defined cultural competence as:

[s]tudent and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples.

Universities have responded to this document in different ways. Western Sydney University (2012), for example, has spelled out the idea of a knowledge base in terms of both appreciating culture and encouraging an Australian identity that is inclusive of Indigenous Australians. Among other aspects such as communication, the university has unpacked the notions of leadership and partnership as understanding the circumstances and needs of Indigenous Australians and possessing the capacity to engage and partner with Indigenous Australians. We acknowledge that when academics such as ourselves work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, terminology is changed to reflect the preferences of each community. In this study, the term “First Peoples” acknowledges the history of Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait

Islanders prior to white settlement.

Griffith University has committed itself to the creation of a curriculum that is informed by and respects the knowledge systems of the First Peoples of Australia, but which privileges the importance of a relationship-based approach to this curriculum development. This is reflected in Griffith's First Peoples documentation: "Griffith recognises that the continuation of the living Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture requires it to enter into respectful partnerships where all parties come to the partnership as equals" (Griffith University 2015, n.p). Curtin University, which has the highest proportion of Australian First Peoples students in the country, has enacted its revised Reconciliation Action Plan, which includes multiple initiatives, including a credit-bearing "on country" unit available to both students and staff. The university defines competency from both the individual and organisational perspectives, and it expects every individual to engage "in a spirit of mutual respect and reconciliation", realised by "challenging one's own cultural assumptions, values and beliefs" (Curtin University 2015, n.p).

From the collaborative service-learning work that Griffith, Curtin and Western Sydney Universities have undertaken since 2009 (see Bartleet et al. 2015), such competencies have been observed in the many students who have challenged their cultural assumptions, values and beliefs through service-learning experiences in local and regional contexts, and through engagement that has been variously demanding and transformative. The competencies have also been observed in the reactions of students who were given "skin names". Skin names are a feature of the kinship system that defines Aboriginal social organisation and family relationships. The kinship system provides guidelines for how people relate to each other and their roles and responsibilities (see clc.org.au/articles/info/aboriginal-kinship). Being given a skin name enabled university students to gain an "insider" glimpse of the complexities of social organisation. By embodying their skin name, these students learned through experience their roles and obligations in relation to one another, interacted reflexively with their community colleagues and were guided to understand their responsibilities for the land.

Context, Approach and Theoretical Framework

Context

This paper reports from a national arts-based service-learning project in which students from creative arts, media and journalism, and pre-service teachers, worked with Aboriginal people in urban and rural areas of Australia. Academics from the three universities knew each other and also knew of one another's current or anticipated work with service learning in Aboriginal communities. Hence, the decision to align these studies was a simple one, resulting in rich learning for the academics and their students. The three universities ran parallel studies involving 70 arts majors and 37 pre-service teachers, more than 140 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and Elders and more than 150 Indigenous youth.

The Curtin University program responded to a National Indigenous Higher Education Network (2009, p.7) recommendation to the United Nations that explicated the societal importance of such work, seen by Indigenous people as a "critical step toward the accomplishment of social parity, sovereignty and economic freedom for their people". Academics and students worked with the Wadjuk Noongar people, who are the traditional custodians of metropolitan Perth, including the land on which the university is located.

The location of metropolitan Perth was also selected for reasons of program sustainability and the hope that by working with people in their own communities, students might begin to reconceptualise familiar places (Thomson et al. 2015). Early in the semester-long program, students attend cultural-awareness training and begin their partnership with local Aboriginal community organisations. Students spend time with their partners each week. They also attend regular workshops on campus and meet with lecturers for technical and other support. Some community organisations suggest video, documentary and journalism projects; other projects and stories emerge as students take the time to listen to, interact with and allow a relationship of trust to develop with their partners.

Since 2009, the Griffith University program has seen students and staff travel from Brisbane to Tennant Creek for two weeks to work with artists and Elders at Winanjikari Music Centre and Barkly Regional Arts. This organisation provides an interface between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous cultures and delivers around 50 annual programs and projects to over 800 artists. Given the region's high levels of unemployment, social disadvantage and cultural erosion, The programs at Barkly Regional Arts focus on building social and community well-being, cultural maintenance, career pathways and financial and health support. The service-learning program features three key phases: intercultural training, including community-based classes on language and culture with respected Warumungu Elders; collaboration with Aboriginal artists at Winanjikari Music Centre; and reflective activities including fieldwork diaries, interviews about the learning process and analysis of the implications of the collaboration for Aboriginal content in the curriculum; and a five-minute digital story using footage from their trip. Once they return to their city campus, students communicate their experience to the university and broader urban community via digital stories, workshops and presentations.

Western Sydney University has an ongoing partnership with the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF). As a result of this partnership and ALNF's links with the Papula Aparr-Kari Language and Cultural Centre at Tennant Creek, there have been annual treks to Tennant Creek with pre-service teachers since 2009. A trusting relationship has developed. Pre-service teachers work for four weeks at the high school, where the population is almost 100% Indigenous. In particular, pre-service teachers for music, dance, visual arts and English have worked alongside the staff at the high school, absorbing how Australian Aboriginal learning is most effective and how to connect with families and community through events such as open-microphone nights and multicultural nights. Guided by the suggestions of community members, pre-service teachers document their learning in the form of short films, which they present to the community in celebration of the achievements of the young people they have taught. These less commonplace aspects of a pre-service teacher practicum prompt the pre-service teachers to consider not just *what* has been learned, but *how* it has been learned, and how this learning might be presented to learners, peers and the community.

Approach

Once ethics approvals were in place, eligible students enrolled in one of the three programs. Participants were assured of their anonymity and they were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. Students and community members were identified with pseudonyms. The completion of pre-requisite discipline specific units of study ensured that participants would have the relevant skills and knowledge required to complete a service-learning project.

Reflections came from students, academic team members, community members and other

stakeholders. They took several forms, including digital stories, short film clips and audio files; journals, sometimes with sketches and photos attached; guided critical reflections delivered at key points of a project; informal discussions; and events in which experiences were shared with multiple stakeholders. Early interviews gauged students' expectations, explored their fears and anxieties about working with Aboriginal people and began the process of self- and shared reflection. Later interviews revisited expectations, fears and anxieties and focused on practice and transformations in both practice and thinking. Post-program interviews invited students to reflect on the relationship between the transformations in their practice and the final form of the creative works they produced; how their experiences might affect their identity and development as professionals; and how their thinking had changed. Scaffolding questions included: What are your expectations? How confident are you in interacting with Aboriginal students and community members? What are the strongest experiences and realisations you have had today? Are there any phases you have gone through in developing relationships with the local community? How does this experience help to shape your future?

Analysis was initially inductive and involved multiple readings by multiple team members (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep 2009). This led to agreement on common coding categories, interpretations and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba 1985). At this point, NVIVO software was employed to revise the coding schema and preliminary themes. The full dataset was then coded, and the final collection of coded material, including matrix query analyses developed through NVIVO, was presented to the team and advisory board. Following their feedback, the team streamlined the coding schema to create the final dataset. For the purposes of this paper, team members mined the dataset for examples of reflection in which students reported and responded to their experiences, related and reasoned with their experiences or reconstructed their thinking or action as a result of their experiences. This involved inductive analysis by each of the authors, followed by cross-member checking and refinement. The analytical framework was guided by Ryan and Ryan's (2010) "4 Rs" reflective framework, described later in this section.

Theoretical framework

Our previous work has identified three interconnected ways of learning, which we frame as *Ways of Knowing*, *Ways of Being*, and *Ways of Doing* (Bartleet et al. 2014). Drawing inspiration from Aboriginal scholar Karen Booran Mirraboopa Martin's (2003) descriptions of a Quandamooka worldview, within these interconnected ways of learning we articulate nine ways in which engagement occurs. Shown below, these ways of learning are conceptualised through our reflection for learning and our learning through reflection:

Ways of Knowing

- sitting down on country
- respecting culture and First Peoples' worldviews
- transforming understandings and worldviews through critical reflection

Ways of Being

- building and deepening relationships
- learning and sharing in reciprocal ways
- responding to contextual politics with sensitivity

Ways of Doing

- using the arts as a medium for connection and collaboration
- designing and implementing arts-based service learning (ABSL) projects to meet community and institutional needs
- building sustainability into ABSL projects

We facilitate interconnected ways of working through a participatory action research approach within which all participants are “co-researchers and collaborators in the process of gathering and interpreting data” (Boylorn 2008, p.600). In keeping with the action-research cycle, we encouraged students to engage in reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön 1983) so that they might come to a “conceptual understanding of the nature of emotional understanding and its links to change processes in individuals and organisations” (Leitch & Day 2000, p.188). Critical reflection within the action-research cycle has been central to both our development of the above framework and our ongoing review and renewal of activities. As scholars, our reflections have taken multiple forms from the informal debrief to the more considered journal reflection, peer interviews and guided reflections. Students and lecturers reflected from the first class by interviewing one another about our intentions, hopes and fears for the project. Throughout the semester we kept journals, for which reflective questions were provided as a guide. We completed guided reflections at the start and mid-way point of the project, and students attended an interview at the project’s completion. We also met regularly as a cohort to reflect on our experiences and share our challenges and achievements.

Within this framework, we are mindful that at the core element of the experiential service learning described in this paper lies in student learning, in particular the development of cross-cultural, Indigenous competencies and confidence. As Mezirow (2006, cited in Ryan & Ryan 2013, p.246) points out, this development requires both time and guidance:

When students are provided with opportunities to examine and reflect upon their beliefs, philosophies and practices, they are more likely to see themselves as active change agents and lifelong learners within their professions.

Despite this and the fact that the value of reflection in student learning is widely recognised, we accept that it is also a “complex, rigorous, intellectual, and emotional enterprise” that is not easy to do well (Rodgers 2002, cited in Ryan & Ryan 2013, p.245).

Ryan and Ryan (2010) share our concerns about defining and delimiting the meaning of reflection, preferring instead to think of the potential for reflection as encompassing a myriad of understandings. Ryan and Ryan outline two particular challenges to achieving this potential.

First, they contend that “despite the rhetoric around the importance of reflection for ongoing learning, there is scant literature on any systematic, developmental approach to teaching reflective learning across higher education programmes/courses” (p.244). Second, they remind us that “professional or academic reflection is not intuitive”, and that effective integration of reflective thinking will require a consistent approach and “specific pedagogic intervention” (p.244).

Responding to Rodgers’s observation, Ryan and Ryan have advocated the need to recognise different types and levels of reflection, ranging from descriptive accounts of activities to intensive and transformative reflection and action. In this paper we employ Ryan and Ryan’s (2013) adaptation of Bain et al.’s (2002) model of scales, or levels, of reflection for three purposes: as our

framework for the analysis of reflection; to inform our suggestions for a pedagogical approach; and to maximise the potential for a “shared language for students and staff around reflection” (Ryan & Ryan 2013, p.250).

Much of the utility in Ryan and Ryan’s model of designing and assessing reflective practice comes from their assertion that the model is transferable to multiple contexts. Their four-level hierarchy of reflection (the 4Rs) progresses from the most basic *reporting of and responding to* an incident, to *relating* the topic to one’s personal experiences, *reasoning* through a focus on the detail and how others might respond and, at the most complex level, *reconstructing* future actions toward constructive change in society. Table 1 shows our adaptation of the model, and we report and discuss our findings using this framework.

Level 1: Reporting and responding (focus on topic at hand)	
1.1 Reports incident	Reports what happened or what the issue or incident involved.
1.2 Reports on relevance	Relevance: Establishes perceived relevance to the topic.
1.3 Responds with observations, opinions, questions	Responds by making observations, expressing an opinion, asking questions.
Level 2: Relating (focus on relationships between topic and self, including own experiences)	
2.1 Relates to self	Makes a connection between the incident or issue and self: skills, professional experience or discipline knowledge.
2.2 Relates to own experiences	Relates to the past. Asks, "Have I seen this before? Were the conditions the same or different?"
2.2 Relates to capacity to act	Asks, "Do I have the skills and knowledge to deal with this?"
Level 3: Reasoning (focus on detail, perspectives, how others would respond)	
3.1 Details the topic and its importance	Details significant factors underlying the incident or issue AND explains and shows why they are important to understanding it.
3.2 Includes theory and literature	Refers to relevant theory and literature in support of the above reasoning.
3.3 Focuses on the possible responses of others	Considers different perspectives. Asks, "How would a knowledgeable person <i>or others in general</i> respond?"
3.4 Considers ethics, equity and social justice	Mentions what ethics are involved. <i>This might align with social justice and equity.</i>
Level 4: Reconstructing	
4.1 Reframes own future practice or understanding	Reframes or reconstructs future practice or professional understanding.
4.2 Considers strategies for future occurrences	Asks, "How would I deal with this next time? What might work and why? Are there different options? What might happen if...?"
4.3 Considers strategies AND aligns these with theory	Are my ideas supported by theory?
4.4 Considers potential change-agent role	Can I make changes to benefit others?

Table 1. Levels of reflection, adapted from Ryan & Ryan (2010)

Findings and Discussion

When we consider the development of Indigenous competencies, we are really thinking about a process of learning how to work alongside Australian Aboriginal people in a way that respects their worldviews and ways of knowing, being and doing. This is a long and ongoing process that occurs with the guidance of people who have been doing this for a time and for whom the community holds respect. The way in which we have coded reflections according to Ryan and Ryan's (2013) model illustrates the development of students' thinking and reflection during their experiential-learning programs. Sometimes this development has happened as students voice their ideas – the action of speaking aloud about something they may not previously have considered. One pre-service student teacher, Lyn, recalled instructions she had received when arriving in the community, and how her understanding had developed over time. To do this she reflected at first in a basic way, at level 1 (reporting and responding):

[When I was told] “this is how we treat Aboriginal people”, it made it kind of scary. Like, don't approach people, don't ask – don't look at people directly and don't ask people a question and expect an answer straight away, was making me think that they're fragile or something.

Later, she related the experience to something a friend had told her, adding a second perspective (relating to experiences in the past – level 2, reflection):

I have a friend that works a lot with Aboriginal people in land rights and stuff and one of the best things that he said about it is that people seem to think that Aboriginal people are in some way special, but they're just people.

After a few days, Lyn was able to add her own experiences (combining multiple perspectives – level 3, reasoning):

They're people like you and me, they get angry, they are joyful, they love their family, they don't – you know, they're just like us, so don't treat them very differently.

Having developed her own view, she came to a basic understanding of reflection at level 4 as she began to reframe how she would approach inter-cultural interactions in the future:

I understand that there are cultural differences that you should be aware of, but I think most of the people that we would've been dealing with...they weren't worried about people looking at them straight in the eye.

At a more complex phase of level 4 reflection, Lyn was able to imagine how these interactions might differ according to context. From this came the comment that she had perhaps not been given appropriate guidance at the start:

I think maybe that – I think that it's almost as though we weren't considered intelligent enough to figure out how to deal with the cultural interchange.

Finally, Lyn made a comparison at the scalar level between her experiences in the Australian city of Darwin and those in the small Aboriginal community:

...[the] same problems I experienced in Darwin where the white people live in one world, Indigenous people live in another world, and there are a few people that mix it up.

In a similar way, Lyn described a reflective journey that she had taken to reach this level: reflection that develops a way of future action informed by lived experience:

How has this experience shaped how I think about other people, places or things? The experience has strengthened the fact that all people are equal and deserve the same opportunities as everyone else. I'd love to teach in a place like Tennant Creek so I can show kids that they really can do anything with their lives...that if I come from a background very similar to theirs, and have a dream to do something meaningful with my life, they can too.

In terms of Ryan and Ryan's (2013) levels of reflection, Lyn incorporated the level 4 element of future-oriented thinking, in which understanding and future practice are reframed and reconstructed. Teachers and community members influenced this reflective learning journey through their respectful relationships with school students and their families.

In a more extended way, the next reflection is about the richness of cross-curricular learning and the way this might transform a sense of connection with Australian Aboriginal students. This is a reflection about a specific context, but its approach to humour, playfulness and linking aspects of learning are intended to refer more generally to Aboriginal students:

I'm not experienced in teaching the age groups that I'm teaching. So I've had to develop the skill set for that early rapport. I am beginning to develop that and I feel quite comfortable in being more playful and demonstrative, using warmth and humour to really get the kids on board.... Ideally, for me, I'd extend the class work on China. We could be doing dance, playing music in the morning at assembly, we could be doing big poster art. I like deep learning and creativity under it all.... I haven't got the answers but these are things that I think about. Let's look at Chinese art. What are contemporary artists doing? How are they talking about freedom and about restriction? What are the materials they are using? That's what I think. I think I'll open a school one day. (Carmela)

Carmela expressed a vision of linking experiences, having students develop curiosity, modelling that curiosity for students and reaching out for a better way of teaching and learning. Once again, this reflection is at level 4.

The two reflections show how much they valued in the experiences they shared and how much they wanted to continue expanding their own vision and that of the Aboriginal students and community members with whom they worked. Also evident in students' reflections are the competencies affirmed in the *National Best Practice Framework* (Universities Australia 2011) for understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and cultivating awareness of Indigenous protocols. These competencies indicate respect, understanding, a thirst for knowledge about different cultures and pride in Indigenous Australian achievement.

Developing these competencies has meant adopting multiple perspectives in the analysis of experiences, and reframing sometimes-implicit assumptions and understandings. An example of this has been the difficulty of reconciling Australia's dominant colonial history with multiple histories and ways of understanding: in particular those relayed by Australia's First Peoples. The deep impact of colonisation and Australia's socio-political history led journalism academics and students to reach out for this understanding in their reflections, as seen in the narrative from Su, an academic at Curtin:

The cultural awareness training was so genuine and so very sad. [Our trainer] said, “the racism in Australia is insidious because we don’t see it”. It just seems so hopeless – it’s such a mess and I don’t see any way of making it right... Perhaps the most powerful message for all of us was one he gave to the students: “You will be at the forefront of shaping people’s views.”

This academic came to the realisation that change can happen at the grass-roots level. In her level 2 reflection, Su questioned her capacity to act, and then related this to her work, realising that she had the capacity to influence change through her work with students. Many students came to a similar understanding, as seen from screen-arts student Simon:

We put in time to sit down with them and build that relationship. If the documentary was done commercially, it would have just been the news hiring someone – them coming up with all the ideas – whereas it was us getting to know the community and how we could put in their personal story into the documentary. So it wasn’t just spending one day there...doing the interview and getting out of there straightaway so you can get it on the news. It was about sitting down and noticing how they work and their daily routines...sitting there and actually listening. That’s the sort of thing that I love to do...because you get to actually learn about the person more.

This reflection was about changing ways of practice, about a changed state of mind and a commitment to working differently. Community members were central to the development of such understandings, often adding dimensions that would have otherwise been hidden. In one case, the unfamiliar was experienced in the organisation of community-based arts activities as a workplace. The reasons for this were explained by one of the community members:

...major funding comes from the [Australian] government ... In fact, it defines the centre as a work and training place.... [W]e’re creating a really strong local economy, but whatever approach we take, and wherever we’re headed, we are defined a little bit by that funding that comes in, and that is as a workplace – a workplace that is also attached to cultural-maintenance funding and cultural support.

The workplace model came as a surprise to students, who were accustomed to seeing arts practice, particularly that in the visual arts, take place in unregulated environments. Student musician Eve initially reflected about the differences in arts practice, relating at level 2 her own experiences with those she had encountered within the community:

...when you’re not in a place long enough to really see how things work, you can’t make judgements, but straight away I thought, “People are punching a clock to do artwork. That seems weird.” Because one of the things I noticed in there was a notice about their timesheets: “You must fill in your timesheet or you won’t be paid.”

Later, she began to reflect on the logic of this practice in terms of market value and quality versus quantity:

Now, there’s a real dichotomous feeling there because on the one hand I’m thinking, “Why should you have to punch a clock to do artwork and is it just about being prolific? Then if it becomes too prolific, is there any value left in it?”

Finally, Eve progressed from this level 3 reflective thinking to reframe her understanding by considering the benefits of the practice for the salaried artists. She began to reconstruct her

understanding, and this level 4 reconstruction led her to consider broader issues of equity and social justice. Ultimately, she repositioned her own thinking as a “white person’s perspective”:

But on the other hand, ...you’ve got to start somewhere, and money is autonomy....

If you’ve got no money, you’re equal no matter what colour you are. If you start from the bottom, you can’t be expected to all of a sudden be selling \$30,000 paintings, because even if you could, it wouldn’t work psychologically.... So punching a clock to do artwork, if that pays money, why not do that?...

It’s easy to, I don’t know, kind of see it from a white person’s perspective and go, “Well, I don’t know if that’s kind of a good thing to do.” You know, these people are earning money, good on them....

Eve’s reflection is another example of a change in rhythm, the unexpected, which in turn encourages students “to reflect on their ways of thinking, develop trust, show respect, learn about and from country, share and take the time to build interpersonal connections in appropriate ways” (Bartleet, Carfoot & Murn 2015, p.45). Eve employed reflection to work through an initial jarring of different agendas that we have encountered countless times as educators, learners and researchers working in cross-cultural contexts. Eve’s experience resonates with those described by Barney and Solomon (2009), who insist that the jarring of agendas needs to be continually negotiated. In this case, by combining ways of knowing, being and doing to make sense of her experience, Eve was negotiating with herself, through reflection.

A different change of rhythm, this time in the form of an entirely new experience, prompted student musician Emma to reflect on her work with community members in Tenant Creek. Each excerpt from Emma’s reflections illustrates an enhanced understanding, a questioning, and, finally, the realisation that she could become a change agent:

At level 1, Emma reported and responded to her experience:

It was an experience like none other that I’ve ever had.... But the overall affair that we had on that Saturday, recording over a long series of hours, the spectacle of these women painting themselves and singing and eventually dancing at the end of the day, was something so unique and enduring for me. It’s just, it has left an incredible impression on me, it really has opened my ears and opened my, I guess, artistic palate to a lot of these songs.

At level 2, she related to herself and her previous experiences:

I think it has challenged...a lot of the perceptions I had about traditional Indigenous art. I think a lot of the traditional Indigenous art forms, in singing and dancing, that I’ve come in contact with before...were really quite sterilised and mediated and watered-down versions to try and be accepted in a wider musical palette or wider artistic palette.

Progressing to level 3, Emma considered other perspectives and possible responses:

But what I saw on Saturday was so powerful and so unique, I think it really is quite an insult for this kind of sterilisation to keep occurring. I think so much of Australia and a lot of other places around the world are ready and would be quite willing to witness this kind of art or this kind of spectacle.

And at level 4, Emma began to reconstruct her future practice as a potential change agent:

...[t]heir Indigenous background, while I think some people might see it as some kind of shallow kind of stereotyping of them. Like, wow, an Indigenous band. What if these guys were of any other ethnic background? Would you still have the same perception? Well, I know. That's something that will probably be brought up if I ever brought them over to the east coast [of Australia], which is something I hope to do.

By engaging with and documenting reflection within a supportive environment, students learned to engage in critical self-monitoring as they attended to their learning experiences. They “wrote” their experiences and shaped their professional identities as they developed and refined the philosophies that related to their developing selves and careers. As seen from the brief examples and discussion, the central presence of reflection in our research on (and within) service learning can be understood through what Mobely describes as “mindful service learning” (2011, p.89), which requires participants to “(re)consider their individual identities and perspectives and those of their cultural and historical inheritance”. As Mobely (2011) asserts, mindful reflections can lead to an understanding of “our individual identities as well as our sense of shared community” (p.86), and to a consciousness that is at the root of democratic citizenship.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The study described here employed Ryan and Ryan's (2013) model of reflection to analyse reflections, inform our pedagogical approach and maximise the potential for a shared language within our interconnected ways of learning. In terms of limitations, we acknowledge that in this paper we focus on students' reflections in line with the journal's focus on reflection in learning. We have, however, amassed reflective data from community members and from ourselves as participant researchers, and we anticipate a focus on these cohorts in future publications and teaching resources. In our future work we also seek to connect with Indigenous modes of reflective practice, such as the “Dadirri” practice of deep listening and acceptance (see West, Stewart, Foster & Usher 2012), which can form a different critical lens for the analysis of participatory action research such as that described here.

A pertinent aspect of the reflections across cohorts in our work is that of emotion (see Harvey et al. 2012), and we note that the addition of emotion to our analytical frame would strengthen both our understanding of reflective practice and our ability to respond as educators. This would be a valuable avenue for future research. Future research might also move beyond the personal to consider the positional, or to consider the personal and positional together; it can be argued that both are inseparable from the emotional and the dispositional.

Within the framework of participatory action research, our interconnected ways of learning were experienced and conceptualised through reflection for learning and learning through reflection. In particular, we observed emergent Indigenous cultural competencies as students challenged, and in many cases began to reframe, their cultural assumptions, values and beliefs.

The model led us to understand the progression of reflection, from the simplest forms of reporting through to restructuring current understandings, proposing future practices and exploring the potential for active change. In particular, we noted that students' reflections progressed not only in levels of reflection, but also in points of reference (from self to others) and in stages that aligned with the phase of their experiential-learning program. These stages can be thought of in terms of the hierarchy of reflections described by Ryan and Ryan (2010). The three stages (Figure 1) were

apparent both in students who engaged in two-week intensive programs and in those who engaged in unit-based, semester-long programs.

The importance of reflection to the process of job-readiness or employability is shown by its inclusion as a graduate attribute of many higher-education institutions. However, reflection such as that reported here has relevance beyond the preparation of students for work. The effective integration of reflective thinking supports students to develop their understanding of, and to make connections between, what they encounter both inside and outside the university: it fosters their ability to “make associations and reconciliations between what they know and what they experience” (Billett 2011, p.14). Promoting and engaging students in the high-level skills of critical reflection and thinking (Caldicott 2010) moves them – and us – beyond the disciplinary canon; it is central to developing “personal qualities associated with being agentic, critical and reflexive within a domain of activities in which students are learning” (Billett 2011, p.14).

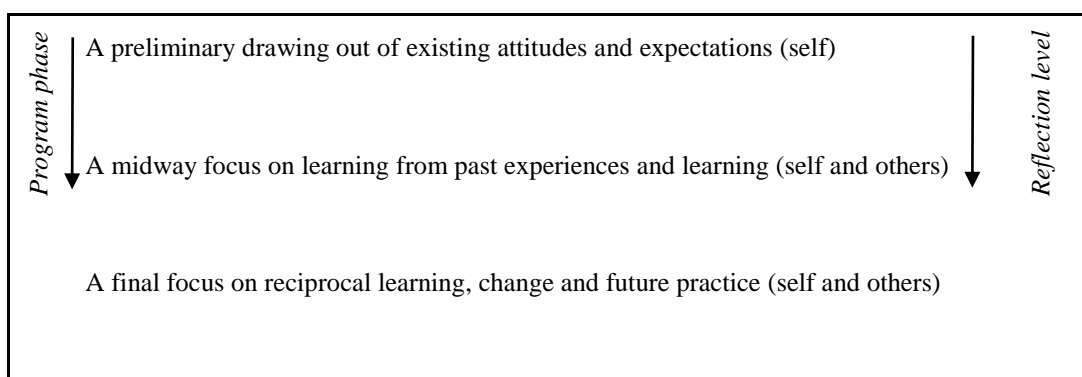


Figure 1. Stages of reflection within an experiential-learning program

In experiential service learning programs such as those described here, or indeed in work-integrated learning contexts more broadly, we concur with Billet (2011) that the opportunity to participate in experiential-learning programs is insufficient in itself for sound student learning; rather, students need preparation before, support during and discussion after their experiences. As Swords and Kiely (2010) contend,

the most powerful transformative learning experiences stem from intentionally structuring service-learning program activities before, during, and after the program to engage students in critically reflective learning and contextual, emotional, visceral, and connected forms of learning. (p. 151)

As students transform their understanding and practices, they transform themselves and their relationships with others. This is an especially important understanding for this paper, where strong, collaborative relationships with our Indigenous partners that were built on trust were critical to the success of each program. The reflections included in our paper are not reflections about understanding Aboriginal people; these are reflections that are deeply concerned with changing future ways of action. In line with Mitchell’s “critical consciousness” (2008), students have been brought to think differently about their lives. In doing so they have become more engaged in critical reflection about not only their lives, but their relationships with others. Through

their cross-cultural exploration, they have also been at times confronted by industry “ways of doing” (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones 2011) that are in opposition to their developing awareness of racist perspectives and behaviours (Rick & Pollock 2012). On these occasions, students have drawn support from peers, lecturers and community members to understand how they might develop more respectful and informed practices.

In practical terms and reflecting on our own experiences of integrating critical reflection through these programs, we have come to realise that students need to be prepared for and supported through their cultural, social and practical development with explicit cross-cultural learning throughout the programs. Incoming students need to be adequately prepared with relevant discipline knowledge so that their focus is on the program itself rather than the development of technical skills and knowledge. They need to engage with regular readings that are discussed and critiqued with others, and these readings need to include the theoretical framework in which their learning is positioned (in our case, the action-research cycle). Students must also learn to recognise the importance of sense of place in their practice (Thomson et al. 2015) and to have the opportunity to converse with Elders before and during the service-learning experience.

Most importantly, we acknowledge that few students know how to reflect and fewer still know how to make something of their reflections. Because of this, students need to be supported in their development of critical reflective practice with a variety of techniques such as guided reflections, regular debriefing sessions, reflective journals, discussions, focus groups and peer interviews. Regardless of the students’ year of study, program phase emerges as a crucial consideration when designing critical reflection tools. Reframing our own work to take full account of program phase when asking students to consider points of reference and reframe implicit knowledge is likely to enable us to better engage students in deeper levels of reflection, and to greater effect, than has been possible to date.

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