

The Road Less Travelled? Pathways from Passivity to Agency in Student Learning



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This qualitative study examined fourth-year undergraduate students' responses to reflective writing prompts and journal entries related to their practical experiences in two capstone courses, both based in SBL/PBL pedagogies. We examined their 'strategic' approaches to learning that make engagement with subject matter and learning processes more instrumental than meaningfully grasped and applied. Three levels of analysis were used in a recursive process of description, reduction, and interpretation, and the results were added to our previous work examining student responses to reflective activities that foster deep learning. Our provisional conclusions are that strategic learners are invested in a mastery relationship with subject matter that makes grade procurement the evidence of this mastery and this shifts their focus to product over process as an obvious consequence. This disconnect from process leads students to an unhelpful relationship with formative assessment and feedback. They tend to wrestle with the formative elements and see them as mini summative assessments or quasi final products, rather than the necessarily perplexing engagement that leads to the imaginative generation of possibilities and recursive building and refining of ideas and processes. Our future research will focus on environments that encourage more comfort with mistakes and contingencies as learning opportunities.

Introduction

This article reports on a qualitative study examining fourth-year undergraduate students' responses to reflective writing prompts related to their practical experiences in two capstone courses. Our findings were derived from three levels of analysis utilizing a recursive process of description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1988) and build on our previous work examining student responses to reflective activities that foster deep learning (Frost, Connolly, & Lappano, 2014). While we have seen

evidence of deep learning in a percentage of students, it is the superficial and strategic learners who compelled our interventions for the present project. Specifically, we wanted to address the strategic approaches that make engagement with subject matter and learning processes more instrumental than meaningfully grasped and applied. This disconnection from subject matter and actual engagement in professional practice is troubling given the fields in which our students will be employed

(e.g., health care and human services delivery, teaching, coaching, therapeutic applications, clinical kinesiology).

Service-based learning courses give physical education and kinesiology students a chance to apply the theory they are learning in their degree programs in practical contexts before they graduate. Our students work with actual clients, either designing and implementing physical activity programs with adults or engaging with children and youth with various disabilities. Our goal is that they learn not only the appropriate professional and ethical behaviour necessary for their future careers but, more importantly, how to think creatively and respond to changing circumstances. Mezirow (2000) has suggested that this type of learning should include an understanding of context, critical reflection on assumptions, and validation of meaning by assessing reasons.

Our theoretical premises for this paper reside in the work of Paulo Freire (1987) and Lev Vygotsky (1962), as well as the more recent work of Noel Entwistle and Paul Ramsden (1983). Freire claimed that learners alienated from their own forms of expression also experience alienation from the larger culture and from their sense of themselves as cultural agents. This alienation is painfully evident when students attempt to use their previously assessed knowledge in an applied context and experience a profound disconnect between material they assumed they had grasped and the practical knowledge that the situation demands. In effect, they are without a form of expression even though they have the assessment grade that supposedly attests to some level of expertise. Their grasp of the subject matter is, in Freire's terms, naïve - literal to the extent that it is practically useless. They cannot move beyond a single formulation of the problem before them nor create possible solutions or responses to it.

Vygotsky (1962) is equally cogent in his emphasis on the move from maximally compacted inner speech to maximally elaborated outer speech, that is, communicating knowledge in ways that people other than oneself can engage with in meaningful ways. This is not to suggest that moving

beyond literal learning or maximally compact inner speech is in any sense a taken for granted or easily achieved learning objective. Indeed, these moves are transformative and are usually the result of deep learning, and often involve threshold concepts. Freire also insists on learners engaging knowledge at the level of culture and Vygotsky complements this with his compelling work on proximal learning, the power of learning from peers and other community members in both constructed and natural settings.

Entwistle and his colleagues (1983, 2000) link deep learning to meaningful engagement with subject matter, and further connect this meaningfulness to how learners build associations between experiences and understanding. That is, learning will likely be anchored in memory in meaningful ways through associations with contexts and experiences within those contexts. Entwistle claims that *how* curriculum is organized influences how meaningfully it is engaged and retained by learners. He advocates organizing and sequencing around threshold concepts over linear or additive arrangement of subject matter and experiences. Entwistle, Freire, and Vygotsky resonate with John Dewey's early work in experiential education and reflective awareness of the processes involved in problem solving (Dewey, 1910, 1938).

Some commentary is called for here on deep learning and threshold concepts. Deep learning is distinguished from surface or "additive" learning by virtue of the quality and sophistication of the thinking, discernment, and analysis and the integration and consolidation of perspectives, theory, and related sources. In far too many instances, more content, more source material, and more pages substitute in a horizontally additive fashion for engagement with an idea or topic that forces interrogation of premises, recursive comparison of perspectives, deconstruction and analysis of taken for granted assumptions, and deliberate attention to the expressive repertoire. Deep learning compels a connection at the conceptual level, thereby requiring curricular planning around threshold concepts. Threshold concepts are those ideas, premises, or constructions that *next* learning relies upon. In effect, if a particular threshold is not grasped or learned, then

other learning in the course would be adversely affected. Threshold concepts have domino effects, hence teachers need ways of assessing them in an efficient and timely fashion so that the remainder of the course material can be engaged in meaningful ways and refinements can be made when necessary. Curricular alignment depends on this kind of proactive planning and subsequent follow-up analysis of the impact on learning. Aligning learning objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment allows instructors to be more systematic in their analysis of the complex and intertwining influences on learning. Our project examines reflection on action as one of these complex influences on learning and its relationship to deep learning in the particular contexts of problem-based learning and service learning. Our project enlists Freire and Vygotsky and also relies on the scholarship of Entwistle especially in terms of the connectedness across meaningful practical scenarios and deep learning.

The Study

Since the inception of this research project, almost 400 students have taken one or both of the fourth-year service learning courses that are the setting for our observations. Almost 100 have completed the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) questionnaire (Entwistle, Tait, & McCune, 2000). Analysis of the ASSIST suggests that the majority of our students are “strategic” learners: they are motivated to achieve the highest grade possible and are very alert to the assessment process. This is in contrast to the “deep” learner, who seeks meaning, relates and associates ideas, examines the evidence, and engages with material with authentic curiosity and interest. In our courses we apply the principles of assessed reflective journaling as well as anchored associations in meaningful experiences. From the beginning, our students have written a journal entry after each interaction with their client and have used their collection of journal entries to complete reflective writing assignments during the term. The journal entries are structured in a format that

resembles the case notes they will be required to keep as practitioners, and are explained and presented as such at the beginning of the course. The reflective writing prompts require the students to think about, and respond to, issues they are likely to encounter in their future practice. Dymont and O’Connell (2010) have identified a clear understanding of the purpose for the journal, how it fits into the program of study, specific requirements for the entries, and training as factors that encourage highly reflective writing. They have also reviewed the research on the quality of reflection in students’ journals and found a relationship between the quality of reflection and the strength of the associations and linkages students made to learning within events and encounters that they had written about (Dymont & O’Connell, 2011). We believe that reflective writing is an integral part of authentic transformative learning and have been working for the past several years to find the most effective way to encourage the qualities of the deep learner in our students. Our efforts thus far have led us to refining our approaches to journal writing and reflective writing, and to analyzing the students’ responses to these approaches (Frost et al., 2014). In this paper we will share what happened in this, our latest intervention, especially in terms of student passivity and agency.

In our first iteration of working with reflection in a structured way we combined the description of working with the client with reflection on the encounter itself. Students achieved some success with description and reporting but seemed to have difficulty reflecting on their own actions. As a result, we separated the journal from the reflection, allowing more protocol-driven and literal journaling based in professional case-note standards, but still using our original format: What? (What happened?), So what? (Why is it important?), Now what? (What does it mean and what is my response?). Ongoing formative feedback on the quality of this journaling was provided.

Students were asked to include responses to the following elements in each of their journal entries:

- Participants listed
- Interaction information: date, time, place

- A clearly-stated purpose or goal for the session
- A summary of actions
- Notations of required/integrated changes to the group's plan
- Reasons why changes were needed and made
- Notations regarding the degree to which purpose or goal of the session was achieved
- Explanation of how they knew whether the goal of the session was achieved
- Explanation of what would be done differently next session
- Reasons these things would be done differently

Material from the journal entries was used to help the students complete short reflective writing assignments during the term. The reflections were responses to prompts (see below) that were already based in situations of critical distance so that the students did not have to make that shift from their own writing.

- 1) Describe your least preferred client, the type of client with whom you would not want to work, and why (relate your “why” to your characteristics, specialty, training, background, interests, etc.).
- 2) Describe the type of practitioner whom you think this least preferred client needs (i.e., the practitioner's characteristics, background, training, specialties, facility, etc.).
- 3) Reflect on and describe what is preventing you from becoming that type of practitioner.
- 4) Create your mission statement for your future practice. This statement should demonstrate why you belong in your profession, what you can offer your clients, and what makes you distinct.

Once the term was over and grades had been submitted, we re-read the journals of students in both our classes who had provided informed consent, and performed the same semiotic phenomenological analysis (Lanigan, 1988) that was used in the previous stages of this research (Frost et al., 2014). This analysis includes description (reading for the whole, identifying literal elements, key words and idioms, summarizing patterns and salience, and attending to within-case details); reduction (examining revelatory phrases and connections across the within-case and cross-case details); and interpretation (critically comparing the essential features to existing research and contextualizing the features within the research question). Each of us performed this qualitative analysis on our own students' work. When questions arose, we discussed the problematic data and reached a joint conclusion. These three processes of analyses were undertaken in an ongoing, recursive, and constantly comparative fashion. We then distilled our results into literal, interpretive, and critical lenses for presentation and discussion. The results of our analyses on the two data sets (journals and responses to the reflective prompts) are offered below.

Results

Our second iteration was more successful in terms of producing thoughtful and detailed descriptions of client encounters and practitioner behaviours and the reflective components improved for more than 50% of students in both of our classes. However, new challenges emerged in both the journaling and the reflection component for some of the students.

Journals

At a literal level of description

For prompts that asked for a description of the students' actions, some students described what the client did, that is, they reported on the enacted product of their planning, but not on their role in facilitating the session. For prompts that asked for an

explanation of how the students knew that the goals of the session were achieved, some students reported that what had been planned had been completed, believing that the completion of a plan thereby constitutes the achievement of the client's or the program's goals or purpose. For prompts that asked for an explanation of what would be done differently next session, some students proposed mechanical or efficiency-based changes, such as altering the sequence of exercises so that the machines being used were closer together, or rehearsing testing protocols before trying them out on the client.

At an interpretive level of reduction and description

Students tended to report on their client's responses to the session plan, but did not report on what effect their own (i.e., the students') actions might have had both on how the session unfolded and how the client responded to the session. The sessions seemed to be protocol-driven, focused on the lesson/workout focused, but lacking a client-focused approach. There was an emphasis on session outcomes and much less attention paid to processes that were enacted in the session or to students' processes of learning.

At a critical level

We noted tendencies in the students to avoid examining their own role in the interactions that necessarily must happen in a lesson/workout. Their intense focus on protocol placed an undue emphasis on precision over discernment, which led to an inability to adapt to changing conditions in the workout or in the client. This, in turn, led to students assuming that the need to change or adapt constituted a failure of some sort, and thus the possibility, much less the value, of process-based insight was lost. As well, their secondary, but no less intense, focus on planning ironically did not yield effective plans. Indeed, there was a disconnection between planning and implementation, and many plans did not account for contingencies, or were too difficult, irrelevant, or inappropriate. Students also seemed surprised that "winging it" (that is, having to come up with

solutions on the spot, without any investment in forethought or anticipation) did not always lead to enjoyable or effective lesson/workout experiences for their clients. We suspect that these sessions were also equally unenjoyable for the students, especially given their tendencies to avoid examining process and their roles, responsibilities, and possible learning within that process.

Reflection

At a literal level of description

Students described their least-preferred clients as those who would not be sufficiently motivated, those who might pose challenges based in ability or capacity, or those who might present with physical or emotional characteristics that some students reported were unsettling or frightening (for example, a physically large client with a volatile temperament). Other least-preferred characteristics included age, appearance, and the need for lots of planning. In their responses to the type of practitioner that this least-preferred client needed, students frequently deferred to other experts, or declined to place themselves in situations where they might be or feel stressed, incompetent, or embarrassed. In response to what is preventing them from becoming this type of practitioner, students again noted qualifications and further stated that the pursuit of such qualifications was not in their career plans. In their responses to the mission statement prompt, students produced menus of services, and they often reproduced dominant industry clichés, such as "individualized, cutting-edge programs, guaranteed success, motivating environment" (Participant avatars: Daisy, Rose, Oak, Pine).

At an interpretive level of reduction and description

The least-preferred client descriptions might have led the students to realize that the client they described was a person who they saw as being radically different from themselves and their peer group, for example,

“not like me” (Participant avatar: Maple). Some students approached this insight, but did not quite arrive at it, that is, they recognized their aversion for working with people they deemed as different from themselves, but did not see their implicit preference for working with people like themselves.

For prompts that were designed to ask them to project themselves into a practitioner role that required a shift away from their own familiar skill set, some students responded by handing off the client to an already qualified expert, while other students realized they needed more experience, practice, and learning. By discussing a practitioner’s qualifications, it became easier for the students to avoid looking at characteristics, and thus easier to avoid examining and confronting their own characteristics.

At a critical level

We expected that discussions of characteristics might lead students to realize that personal change is possible, and that qualifications alone do not make one a competent, discerning practitioner. However, their foreclosure of a future self (“not in my career plans”, Participant avatar: Oak) was also reflected in their limited and somewhat naïve mission statements. We are concerned that the strategic students’ obsession with grade procurement is interfering with both their ability to engage with an actual client, affecting their capacity to see value in investing in that process, and also, their sense of agency in their own learning and skill development. We wonder how we might turn their strategic tendencies to the development of reflection and agency.

Discussion

We continue to engage with theoretical frameworks premised on experiential learning, reflective practice, and cultural agency. Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning functions as a guide for our problem-based and service-learning approaches. We wanted the students to work through a series of questions that form the structure for their unfolding

learning experience: what they know; what they do not know; and what they need to find out. With each discovery, the process continues in a recursive way that ideally involves group members taking responsibility for each of these steps and moving the process of problem solving along at a pace conducive to working out the problem or challenge in a timely and transparent fashion, especially if the experience involves working with an actual person, as opposed to the concocted client in a paper-based case study. Descriptions by Entwistle et al. (2000) of deep, strategic, and superficial learning allow us to make sense of the type and degree of engagement that students have with their subject matter and their experiential project. While we have seen evidence of deep learning in a percentage of students in previous iterations of our research (Frost et al., 2014), it is the superficial and strategic learners who compelled our interventions for the present project. Specifically, we wanted to address the strategic approaches that make engagement with subject matter and learning processes more instrumental than meaningfully grasped and applied. This disconnection from subject matter and actual engagement in professional practice is troubling given the fields in which our students will be employed (e.g., health care and human services delivery, teaching, coaching, therapeutic applications, clinical kinesiology).

We hoped to address this disconnection with a revised design for the reflective activities in our courses. We explicitly designed the reflective activities *and* the ongoing processes of participation in the problem-based and service-learning experiences to align with Dewey’s (1910, 1938) idea of reflective thinking as a four-stage process. First, there is presence to experience, where the habitual ways of dealing with the world break down and there is a move to positive perplexity and engaging with the situation at hand (this positive perplexity is almost impossible to avoid if one is working with a client, who brings a whole set of contingencies to the experiential learning situation).

Second, there is description of experience, which involves achieving critical distance from the existential situation rather than rushing to solve it. Here, group members can attempt to figure out what

they know, what they do not know, and what they need to find out. This recursive process is not one that is discouraging. Rather, it offers up pivotal moments that permit a slackening of the strings of habit and a concomitant acceptance of attentiveness to possibilities and trying out new or different strategies.

Third, there is analysis of experience, a series of dry runs through the problem/challenge and its various conclusions, which is the trying out of possibilities mentioned in Step Two.

Fourth, there is intelligent action, where the informed choice made through the dry run process is moved into a chosen course of action, and then monitored for how it works or does not work.

The overall process we wanted for our students was an application of these steps: noticing and describing perplexing experiences, imagining other ways of handling the situation, and testing the outcomes obtained from the analytical phase in actual practice. In addition, we hoped for the development of their metacognitive awareness that when they reflect, they reflect *on* a specific object, *with* certain conceptual tools, *from* given interests and values *within* a specific context. As well, we hoped that they would realize that taking these steps into consideration would make a difference in terms of how they might work in the world of professional practice. This shift would then lead students to a sense of their cultural agency. No longer disconnected from their subject matter and professional practice — in Freire's (1987) and Vygotsky's (1962) terms, no longer alienated from their forms of expression — they have the potential to move into cultural agency, and be an agent within their disciplinary culture, and within the larger culture, with the ability and capacity to analyze, respond to, and transform it.

Our analyses have led us to some provisional conclusions. Our strategic students are invested in a mastery relationship with subject matter that makes grade procurement the evidence of this mastery, a strange and internally reproductive tautology. Their focus on product, over process, is an obvious consequence of their allegiance to the mastery model, as is the product-role tension in their client sessions. This separation from the process in learning also leads to an unhelpful relationship with formative

assessment and feedback, two elements that figure strongly in our courses. As a result of our analysis of the most recent data sets, we have realized that the students who are strategic in their orientation tend to wrestle with the formative elements and see them as mini summative assessments. Furthermore, they see the formative elements as quasi final products rather than the necessarily perplexing engagement that leads to the imaginative generation of possibilities and recursive building and refining of ideas and processes. For our strategic students, the summative score or grade has weight and value, and the formative feedback remains something to be re-categorized into terms that are more familiar: a mirror of the least-preferred client, who is not like “me.”

However, we remain committed to the processes of reflection and deep learning and want to continue to refine our approaches so that we engage as many of our students as possible. Our learning from this iteration of our ongoing project leads us on to our next refinements. We plan on using more online tools for field notes and intend to encourage transparency of process and problem solving. We will experiment with flipped classroom strategies, such as less focus on lecture and more focus on practical problem solving. We hope this will create environments that encourage more comfort with mistakes as sites for learning and contingencies as learning opportunities. While we are realistic about our strategic learners, we are also learning more about them and what they value, and we are committed to using this information to build their capacity for risk taking and re-conceptualizing. We have also learned that we need to continue to use formative feedback that addresses the areas that are strong as well as those needing improvement. We need to facilitate students through Dewey's four steps and support our students' metacognitive awareness of these steps as they unfold. Finally, for now, at least, we need to facilitate our students as they learn how to do problem solving and applied work *in class* with us as teachers, and we need to recognize and promote it as legitimate learning. We remain hopeful that our commitment to process and reflection in student learning will nurture the shift from reflection on action to reflection in action.

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Biography

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