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Abstract

This reflective essay describes my encounter with reflective learning as a student enrolled in the University of Queensland Graduate Certificate in Education (Higher Education) program and the application and integration of reflective learning in a clinical course within the Bachelor of Oral Health program as an educator. Insights gained and lessons learnt in practising the scholarship of teaching and learning in a formal degree program are discussed.

Keywords

Reflective learning, Scholarship of teaching and learning, Higher education

Reflective Learning as a Student and an Educator: Connecting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This reflective essay describes my encounter with reflective learning as a student enrolled in the University of Queensland Graduate Certificate in Education (Higher Education) program and the application and integration of reflective learning in a clinical course within the Bachelor of Oral Health program as an educator. Insights gained and lessons learnt in practising the scholarship of teaching and learning in a formal degree program are discussed.

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I have always wanted to teach, to share my experiences with students and to make a difference to their learning experiences. So, when I was appointed as lecturer at the University of Queensland, School of Dentistry, from which I graduated, I was ecstatic. I vowed to become an effective educator to my students, but knew that I did not know exactly how to do that. I felt I had much to share in terms of professional knowledge and skills in Dentistry (afterall, I did complete three degree programs in the field) but I did not feel the same in the area of teaching. I knew more about what could put students off, based upon my own experience as a student, than what I could do to engage them. It concerned me that I was not really qualified to teach. I felt the need to improve myself. So when I heard about the Graduate Certificate in Education (Higher Education) (GCEd(HE)) program from my Head of the School, I grasped the opportunity.

When I first started, I had not heard of pedagogy, constructive alignment, Bloom's taxonomy, reflective learning or action research. I felt like a new migrant arriving into a new country, trying to speak a new language and attempting to understand and fit into a new culture. When I was asked to keep a reflective journal, I was sceptical. I did not really embrace the idea because it sounded "unscientific" and time consuming. Not being familiar with the practice of critical reflection or the concept of reflective learning made me all the more dubious. However, the mountainous amounts of literature supporting reflective learning and reflective practices convinced me to at least give reflective learning a try. Surprisingly, the more I reflected, the more I found myself enjoying the process. My moments of reflection became an indulgence: a time of recollection, self-evaluation, reassurance, clarification, innovation and transformation.

Contrary to my original belief, keeping a reflective journal was beneficial, highly productive and well worth the time. Reflection added structure to my thinking and united sporadic thoughts, which led to more in-depth consideration that translated to more organized and purposeful actions, which benefited my students. It created "ways of knowing" (Drago-Severson, 2004) and helped me to put different tasks and different roles I had into perspective, to simplify seemingly complicated matters and bring to light the central issues, to unpack problems and generate solutions, to analyse strategies and ideas, to form linkages between issues that would otherwise be embedded and unapparent, as well as illuminated meaning to what I do and who I am as a university

educator. What I initially suspected as a time wasting exercise, was in fact helping me to make better use of my time.

One particular way in which I used my reflective journal was to keep a record of "interpersonal reflection" (Day, 2000) i.e. suggestions and feedback from students and colleagues regarding teaching and learning, what I did or will do in response to these suggestions and ideas for the future. My students were intrigued that I was keeping a reflective journal. Their interest in what I was doing motivated me to further explore reflective learning for them, in the context of dental education and clinical / professional practice.

My search through the literature revealed that there was very little available on reflective learning in Oral Health (an emerging profession in Australia that focuses on prevention of oral diseases, dental hygiene and dental therapy) and none on Oral Health students' perceptions of reflective learning. At around the same time, I was planning an action research project as part of my GCEd(HE) program, so naturally I chose to explore reflective learning. This was further driven by students' feedback that "clinics were mundane" and that "clinics were attended then forgotten". I was determined to optimize and transform their clinical learning from routine and mechanistic to "enlightenment, empowerment and emancipation" (Kember et al., 2000) through critical reflections and reflective journaling:

"Enlightenment is to understand the self in the context of practice. Empowerment is to have the courage and commitment to take necessary action. Emancipation is to liberate oneself from previous ways of being so as to achieve a more desirable way of practice" (Kember et al., 2000, pp.24-25).

Deciding that I would explore reflective learning in Oral Health students was the easy part. Writing an action research proposal proved exhausting. For 13 weeks, we changed, amended, improved, reformulated, reworded and uncluttered our draft proposals through constructive criticism, critical reflection, dynamic discussions, integration and constant feedback from peers, mentors and course coordinators. I learnt some precious lessons about practising scholarship of teaching and learning including: read widely but utilize the literature in a refined and synthesized manner to focus the intervention, implement changes in a course / an area that you have control over, keep each educational intervention simple and specific, design the intervention with an action plan in mind taking into account available timeframe, workload and other commitments, justify your intervention including the aims and objectives, the methodology, the data collection and analyses, consider the need for ethical clearance early and think ahead in terms of publication potential, reiteration of the intervention and future research possibilities.

The intervention saw students thinking critically about their clinical experiences and writing reflectively on a weekly basis. The students embraced the concept of critical clinical reflection. Most students used their clinical reflective journals to gain insights about their strengths and weaknesses through self-evaluation, think more deeply about what they were doing in the clinic, consolidate their understanding in dental hygiene practice, unpack difficult concepts through self-directed learning and to develop professionally. Students valued reflective writing as a learning tool and did not think reflection as a waste of time, although most students identified that critical reflection and writing reflectively are both time consuming. At the end of the intervention, all but one student were convinced that critical clinical reflection is relevant and should be embedded into all dental and oral health curricula.

When asked what they thought of the critical clinical reflection in dental hygiene practice, students typically commented:

"I find doing reflective learning in a discipline that is so focused on scientific and evidence-based reasoning a refreshing experience. It has made me think over each session, how it made me feel and what was done well or could have been done better / differently, set goals... Reflecting introduces a new aspect to clinic that focuses on the individual's learning experience and allows them to grow from it in a positive manner."

Through the intervention and in particular, through my students' experiences with reflective learning, I learnt more about reflection and its impact on clinical learning, gained new insights into critical clinical reflection as a pedagogical tool and discovered elements that are important for the effective use of reflective learning within a clinical course. It allowed me to "test out" my belief regarding reflective learning in a systematic manner and "visualize" the usefulness of critical reflection in enhancing clinical experiences, stimulating self-directed learning, developing professional attributes and constructing knowledge and understanding. It enabled me to appreciate reflective learning from both a learner perspective and that of an educator.

My experiences with reflective learning as a learner and an educator have been positive and enriching. Critical reflections about the style and quality of my teaching and my "ways of being" a teacher have facilitated my growth and development as a university educator without being restrictive or conformational. I was able to develop as an autonomous learner. Whilst reflective learning was a highlight of the GCEd(HE), it was not the only positive. The program exposed me to wealth of education literature that challenged my perspectives, enhanced my awareness of what was being done to improve teaching and learning outside my "little world" and encouraged me to be reflexive, to modify my own practice, implement and evaluate initiatives and effect change.

Larrivee (2000, p.294) explained it as:

"If teachers latch onto techniques without examination of what kind of teaching practices would be congruent with their beliefs, aligned with their designated teaching structures, and harmonious with their personal styles, they will have just a bag of tricks... Unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery they stay trapped in unexamined judgements and interpretations..."

Practising the scholarship of teaching and learning through a formal program such as the GCEd(HE) was invaluable. It allowed me to immerse in the literature relevant to the scholarship of teaching and learning and gave me time in dynamic discussion with peers and teachers - a community of practice committed to improving teaching and learning which ignited my interest in educational research and in practising the scholarship of teaching and learning, independently and collaboratively. In-class discussions helped me to think about things differently and see things from different angles. The processes of action learning and action research took me out of my comfort zone, challenged my thinking, changed my practice, enhanced my confidence in implementing and evaluating changes in an informed manner. The metamorphosis was not without obstacles, uncertainties and risks but, upon reflection, it was well worth it.

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