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PRACTICE PAPER

## Facilitating Reflective Learning Journeys in Sport Co-operative Education

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### Abstract

Facilitated reflection strategies can enhance the learning outcomes for students. However, an important question is whether the strategies utilised are related to the needs of the learner and the learning environment. This paper highlights co-operative education students' reflective journeys over the period of their final work placement of a three-year bachelor degree programme in sport. Comments from the students' final reports illustrated that the critical reflection strategies were relevant to the needs of the learner, enabled them to process the experience, and to develop their learning, professional growth and confidence as reflective practitioners.

**Keywords:** Reflection; Co-operative education; Sport; Practicum; Learning

### Introduction

Co-operative education has been defined as "a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning, through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals" (National Commission for Cooperative Education, 2006). At university level, other terminology is used for similar educational strategies: for example, practicum, internship, field experience and work integrated learning.

Schön's (1983) notion of the 'reflective practitioner' is particularly applicable to the process of co-operative education (Coll and Eames, 2004; Martin and Leberman, 2005). He argued that

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reflective practice is a learned skill most effectively introduced through an experiential component (Schön, 1983; 1987; 1991). Reflection transforms experience and theory into knowledge (Roberts, 2002) and enhances the transfer of learning (Macaulay, 2000).

It is important to incorporate strategies within the design of co-operative education courses to facilitate reflection, as leaving the process of reflection for students to do themselves may result in reflection not taking place. Developing reflective practice involves organised collaboration and interactions between the students, academic supervisors and employers to enhance the learning outcomes (Van Gyn, 1996). The process needs to be perceived to be safe, and to provide structured opportunities and time to observe and reflect individually and with others (Richert, 1990).

The issue of interest addressed in this paper is whether there is value for the students in adopting a wide range of strategies to facilitate reflection within co-operative education programmes. An important question is whether the strategies utilised are related to the needs of the learner and the learning environment. Are the strategies presented here in the sport co-operatives appropriate and do they assist students to develop critical reflection skills?

## **Context**

This paper will address the issue by providing an insight into students' 'reflective journeys' over the period of their final work placement of a three-year bachelor degree programme in sport. This review of facilitation methods, which are typical for the programmes, is also part of an extended programme evaluation (Martin and Leberman, 2005). The co-operative education contexts are the Sport Management Practicum (SMP) at Massey University, Palmerston North, and the Sport and Recreation Cooperative (SRC) at AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand.

## **SMP**

The SMP is a for credit double semester paper, normally undertaken in the third year of study as part of a Bachelor of Business Studies or a Bachelor of Sport and Exercise, and is a compulsory requirement in the Sport Management and Coaching major. The SMP consists of approximately 180 hours of work experience in the sport and leisure industry plus an academic evaluation component, which is equivalent to a quarter of a student's academic year of study. Approximately 40 students complete the SMP each year, equally divided between internal and distance education students.

## **SRC**

There are currently 100 students enrolled in the third year of the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation degree. For the SRC, students complete 350 hours with a sport or recreation organisation, usually two days per week. The experience is undertaken over two semesters, which provides flexibility for the seasonal nature of the sport industry. The part-time nature allows the knowledge and capabilities the students learn in the workplace to be applied directly back into the classroom and vice versa. In addition to the workplace component, 250 hours are allocated to academic activities, which include completing assessment requirements and designing and implementing a project for the host organisation. The co-operative experience constitutes half of the students' total workload for the academic year.

The following are examples of typical strategies that are utilised within both the SMP and SRC, which aim to facilitate reflection both during and after the workplace experience.

## **Learning contract**

The students negotiate a learning contract with the host organisation, which is approved by the academic supervisor. The contract describes their work activities and project focus, which is a significant part of the co-operative experience in both programmes. A critical part

of the contract is the learning objectives that are individually determined by each student. In the contract the student describes the strategies they are going to use and how they are going to demonstrate that they have achieved their objectives. The learning objectives are a significant part of the learning contract as they give the student a framework to use to facilitate reflection during and at the end of the experience. Without these initial focus areas, the student would have to start from a blank page and that is a more challenging process for the student.

## Reflective journal

The students in the SRC are required to keep a log book and journal throughout the whole period. The log book is normally just a list of experiences. It is useful for monitoring by the industry and academic supervisors, and serves as a reminder for the students as to what they have actually done during their time on placement. In both the SRC and the SMP, students keep a reflective journal composed of a brief synopsis (diary type format) outlining the duties performed, work behaviour and reflections on all activities that take place throughout the practicum experience. The journal entails more than just listing experiences; it includes revisiting feelings and re-evaluating the experience, as suggested by Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993).

The SMP students also submit a monthly summary report of their journal to their academic supervisor. The monthly reports are consistent with encouraging reflection in action and also provide an opportunity for the student to receive feedback from their supervisor on the development of their skills in reflective writing.

## Academic supervision

Students are supported in their learning experience by an academic supervisor from within the university who provides one-on-one mentoring. The communication between student and academic supervisor is generally face-to-face; however, for students located at a distance from the university, email and website communication is used as an alternative. Encouraging the student to share their reflections with the academic supervisor is a valuable strategy for facilitating development of the skills required for the student to critically analyse and take meaning from their experiences. Effective supervision and appropriate feedback is a critical part of the learning experience and has been shown to result in greater educational and career success for co-operative students (Ricks and Van Gyn, 1997).

## Practicum evaluation

In the SRC, one of the strategies used to facilitate reflection is a reflective essay, which allows the student to summarise their progress in terms of achieving their learning outcomes and comment on critical incidents. The essay is submitted after about one third of their total work hours and is a strategy consistent with encouraging reflection in action. A reflective assessment, where students are expected to reflect on and critically analyse their whole co-operative experience, also forms part of the final report for both SRC and SMP students. This critical evaluation focuses on the effectiveness of achieving objectives/tasks and utilises performance criteria from the learning contract. It identifies key aspects of learning, strengths and weaknesses, and areas for future professional development.

Personal learning can be unforeseen and unpredictable and is maximised through reflection on experiences. Therefore, it is important that there is flexibility in the nature and structure of the assessment of the individual learning outcomes, identified by the student in the learning contract, so that the learning derived from the experience is not constrained.

## Self and supervisor evaluation

Self and supervisor evaluation are tools that provide feedback on student performance, and they are also a valuable strategy for facilitating reflection. Formal written evaluations of student performance are completed by the industry supervisor and the student halfway through the co-operative and again on completion. The identification of personal and

professional strengths and weaknesses through critical reflection is an essential component of the learning experience.

Comments illustrating the development of critical reflection skills and the value of the reflective strategies in terms of the learning experience have been selected from the practicum evaluation reports that students submitted at the end of the co-operative/practicum experience in either the SRC or SMP in 2005.

## **Discussion**

Encouraging structured reflection can enhance 'conscious reflective activity' (Roberts, 2002), where the learner relives the experience and makes connections between information and feelings produced by the experience. However, the quality of the learning is not dependent on the quality of the experience, but on the quality of the process of reflection (Smith and Betts, 2000).

## **Developing reflective practice**

Some students initially identified difficulty in understanding the value or purpose of the reflective process or the strategies used to facilitate reflection. Appropriate support and guidance is therefore needed to assist students to see the benefits of reflection in terms of their own learning. The following are typical comments:

When first introduced to the skill I considered it a rather pointless and timewasting procedure. But through the guidance of my academic supervisor I have learnt to appreciate the skill's worth. It has enabled me to identify specific problems and successes in my learning. I aim to continue to critically reflect in my future career as I have found it most beneficial to my personal development.

Learning to critically analyse is a hard skill to master, to be able to look at your own experiences and know what you need to improve on can be hard to undertake. This cooperative has provided the opportunity to improve these skills.

The use of journal writing involving narrative description of tasks and reflective writing can be an effective reflective practice tool, although initial comments are often rambling, superficial and focused on cataloguing activities. It often takes the student a period of time to become introspective and reflect on current experiences (Van Gyn, 1996). Students learnt how to translate their thoughts onto paper and then analyse or critique them. For example:

I kept a diary and reflective journal to express my thoughts and feelings and to reflect on activities, responsibilities and certain situations. These records helped in the varying coop assessment and presentations but also allowed me to track personal changes and improvements in the way I deal with situations. To reflect back on my work activities and the perceptions and attitudes I had towards them allowed me to read deeper into situations and experiences and identify areas of personal growth.

Encouraging journal writing attempted to ensure that when critical incidents occurred the learning opportunities from these experiences were not lost. Student comments highlighted that 'the journal provided a valuable record of... experiences and outcomes to look back on for future reference'. However, some students found it quite challenging. One strategy identified as helpful was the use of trigger questions to guide them with their writing, as illustrated by the following comment:

Although I have found it quite challenging to think/write positively it has also challenged me to write constructively. If I had not taken the opportunity to reflect on my experiences I would not be so open to self-improvement. In my reflective journal I found it helpful to ask myself the questions: What were the objectives? What were

the outcomes? What went well and why? What went less well and why? What have I learned? What will I do differently next time?

Providing structured opportunities for reflection can be achieved through using appropriate assessment tasks. One student commented:

The assessments encouraged me to analyse, reflect and evaluate my experiences throughout my coop which definitely helped in the further development of my critical analysis skills.

The reflective essay undertaken part-way through the SRC first semester was highlighted by many students as beneficial to the improvement and development of reflective skills:

During coop 1 there was a lack of understanding of critical reflection and my journal keeping skills were less than satisfactory. It was the completion of my critical reflections assignment that forced me to become more familiar with critical analysis of experience. Following this a more structured approach to journal keeping was developed and a three-step process of reflection was used. The first step was to state the situation, the second step was to state the feelings that resulted from the situation and the third step was to suggest strategies to avoid or improve the situation in the future.

## Supporting student learning

A consistent theme identified from the analysis of the student reports was the contribution that academic supervisors make to facilitating and enhancing reflection. Sharing critical incidents with the supervisor attempts to ensure that the learning from the students' experiences is enhanced. Students often do not acknowledge on their own that the most disastrous experience provides the best learning opportunity and it is an important role of the supervisor to help them with this reflective process.

Students commented that discussing critical incidents with the supervisor was pivotal in the process of reflection:

Talking to my academic supervisor on how I felt and how I dealt with a situation helped me to improve the way I handled a situation the next time. The academic supervisors helped me to confront issues instead of avoiding them.

However, the following comment illustrates that it takes time for some students to establish an effective relationship with their supervisors and to gain the confidence to share their experiences so that the benefits can be achieved:

At the beginning of coop it was difficult to converse with my academic supervisor. At this stage I did not fully comprehend the process of critically reflecting on experiences and therefore did not wish to admit downfalls in my knowledge. As the cooperative advanced, more familiarity was developed between the academic supervisor and me. This resulted in greater confidence to discuss issues with my supervisor.

Overall the students felt that the reflective strategies utilised within the co-operatives had been beneficial to developing their professional growth and confidence as illustrated in the following comment:

Critical analysis and reflective thinking are important as no performance is ever perfect, though before coop began I might have thought I did some things perfectly. A new way of thinking was initiated for me and I began to ask for feedback from others on my performance. Through this process I have become very receptive to

feedback; I can accept feedback from others and use their feedback to improve my performance.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted ways in which reflection can be facilitated in co-operative education. While this review is set in a New Zealand context, these conclusions are transferable to contexts internationally as they demonstrate the value to students of the facilitated reflection process. Encouraging transformation of experience and theory into knowledge and enhancing the transfer of learning are important aspects of co-operative education course design. The examples of strategies that aim to facilitate reflection from the two sport co-operative education courses are related to the needs and intent of the students and the nature of the environment. The student comments illustrated that the critical reflection strategies were appropriate and enabled them to process the experience and develop their learning, professional growth and confidence as reflective practitioners.

However, it is acknowledged by many students that the reflective journey is not easy, and that effective academic supervision is critical in assisting the learner to engage in the reflective process. The development of students' reflection from 'noticing' or 'making sense' to 'making meaning' from their experiences with the benefit of time supports Leberman and Martin's (2004) findings in relation to Kolb's 'experiential learning cycle' (1984), which involves reflection for action (technical reflection, based on the academic component), reflection in action (practical reflection) and reflection upon action (critical reflection) (Boud et al., 1993; Schön, 1983).

Facilitated reflective practice involving the experiential component aims to provide opportunities to transfer the theoretical skills learnt to a real environment. Appropriate strategies, relevant to the needs of the learner, utilised within the structure of a co-operative education experience allows the student to develop effective skills in critical reflection so that learning is enhanced. Co-operative education co-ordinators need to provide appropriate supervision and support for students so that the students are able to understand the purpose and are able to develop the capabilities necessary to be a reflective practitioner.

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