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PRACTICE PAPER

## “It was a great day when...”: An exploratory case study of reflective learning through storytelling

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the development of skills in critical reflection drawing on data from a case study with a group of six Leisure Management final year undergraduate students on a post-work experience module. The student's assessment required them to reconstruct prior learning from 'critical incidents' experienced in the workplace which were developed as stories of personal development for use in mock interview situations. The approach involves the implementation of storytelling technique using McDrury and Alterio's (2003, p. 47) model, "Links between learning and storytelling". The paper explores the process and concludes that this approach has many benefits for student learning.

**Keywords:** critical incidents; reflective learning and storytelling

### Introduction

This paper outlines and evaluates an approach to learning through storytelling designed to encourage students to reflect and learn from prior work experiences, and most particularly from work placement experiences, so that they may better understand their own learning processes. The approach is designed to assist students in becoming reflective practitioners and to enhance their future employability. The context for the case study is the Department of Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality at the University of Gloucestershire, where students undertake a compulsory 12-month paid industrial placement between the second and third levels of a four-year sandwich honours degree programme. On their return to university after placement, students study a module titled, Professional Practice and Career Development. This module was designed to incorporate a structured set of activities to enable students to reflect critically on the experiences provided by the placement and to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses. As a final part of the process, students working with peers from within the group are required to share "stories" of their learning in a mock interview scenario. Underpinning this approach is the theory of reflective learning, described by Boyd and Fales (1983, p. 100) as:

The process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective.

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It is one thing to understand the theory of reflective learning but another to be able to apply and articulate that learning in meaningful ways. In this module techniques such as weekly portfolio tasks, diary writing and the use of peer support are adopted to help students develop short critical stories of personal and professional development. Based on an adaptation of McDrury and Alterio's (2003) model, "Links between learning and storytelling", students reconstruct prior learning from "critical incidents" experienced in the workplace through the process of storytelling. In the discussion that follows there is an analysis of storytelling as a technique for critical reflection, drawing on data from the evaluations of six students who carried out their work experiences in a range of national and international placements within leisure and hospitality organisations.

The paper begins by outlining theories of reflective learning before moving on to explore models for reflective learning through storytelling. The main section of the paper discusses the process used to encourage students to reflect on their experiences, using illustrations from the student's work to show how storytelling helped them engage in "transformative learning". The paper concludes with a brief discussion of how critical reflection poses challenges and questions for student learning and pedagogic practice in leisure and hospitality management education.

## Reflective learning

According to early theorists such as Dewey (1933), reflective learning can often be precipitated by a perceived difficulty or conflict amongst learners, which encourages them to pause and reflect on their situation in order to find a solution. It is the identification of such dissonance in relation to work placement experiences that can provide catalysts for further investigation. As theory in this area has evolved, so too has an interest in the relationship between reflection and subsequent action explained by process models including "single loop" and "double loop" learning. Single loop learning refers to situations where improvement is sought but where values and ways of seeing things remain unchanged. Double loop learning refers to situations where assumptions about ways of seeing life and values are challenged, and improvements are sought on this basis (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow 1990; Schon, 1983).

Most recently, academic attention has focused on innovative approaches for recording reflective processes to enable effective personal development (Stroobants, Chambers, & Clarke, 2007). This has been brought about by an increasing recognition that students benefit from being able to demonstrate the ability to reflect on their learning, to develop future actions from it and to apply this learning appropriately. In this case study students demonstrate their understanding of learning from prior experience, and how this can link to skills and attributes for future employability.

Much of the theory associated with reflective learning is ultimately concerned with making sense of experiences and questioning previously held assumptions leading to new learning, in other words transformative learning. As Mezirow (1990, p. 1) explained:

To make meaning means to make sense of an experience; we make an interpretation of it. When we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision making or action, then making meaning becomes learning.

A central characteristic of transformative learning is the process of reflection - the intellectual and affective activities that lead to exploration of experiences to develop understanding and appreciation (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985).

Moon's (2000, p. 154) "map of learning" is a means of locating reflection through the process of learning. It outlines the stages in the reflective learning process as a five stage model:

1. Noticing: memorised representation.
2. Making sense: reproduction ideas – ideas not well linked.
3. Making meaning: (meaningful, well integrated, ideas linked).

4. Working with meaning: meaningful reflective, well structured.
5. Transformative learning: meaningful, reflective, restructured by learner- idiosyncratic or creative.

The first two stages of the model concern "surface learning", involving memories and often disconnected ideas. For example, where a student identifies a work incident which was in some way important to them and tries to make some sense of it. Stages 1 and 2 of the map of learning suggest that students' thinking may be characterised by a series of disconnected ideas and emotions. In developing the situation further, alternative meanings and interpretations can be sought to enable these ideas to be linked together into a more meaningful account. As the reflective process continues there is the opportunity to progress to "deep learning", involving meaningful, reflective, well structured ideas, and eventually to reach the final stage of transformative learning. Further, Moon (2000) pointed out that this reflective process is most likely to take place where there is a clear intention to move from surface to deep learning, and where the process of reflection is facilitated by others within a small group. It is important to consider that learning can be enhanced and influenced by interaction with others through dialogue and conversation, and that this can lead to deeper understandings from experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). This aspect was addressed by creating appropriate social learning environments in the Professional Practice and Career Development module through the introduction of peer support.

As mentioned earlier, according to Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983), there is a particular value in the dissonance created in certain situations. In turn, critical incidents from prior learning are especially important trigger points for transformative learning to commence. In short, these incidents are often straightforward accounts of mundane day-to-day events that are illustrative of general patterns of behaviour. As Tripp (1993) noted, in a sense they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. This means they appear to be typical rather than critical, yet they become critical through the analysis of them. This case study therefore focuses on developing stories from critical incidents drawn from prior work experience as catalysts for reflective learning.

## Storytelling as a technique for encouraging reflective learning

Stories are a fundamental part of life, used on a daily basis as a means of self-expression and as a way to make sense of life. In short, they are an integral part of our social lives and the way in which we communicate ourselves, and indeed our identity, to the world (Czarniawska, 2004). The value of dialogue, and particularly storytelling, as an approach to extracting new meanings and new learning is well established (McDrury & Alterio, 2003; Moon, 2004, 2007). The Professional Practice and Career Development module was designed specifically to take students on a storytelling journey where they could identify, tell and build their story. Importantly too, these experiences could be expanded and amended through collaboration with others. The innovative approach used in this module, outlined below, used a model developed by McDrury and Alterio (2003), which maps the levels leading to reflective learning indicated in Moon's map of learning to stages in learning through storytelling as shown in Table 1.

Map of Learning (Moon 1999)	Stages of learning through storytelling
Noticing	• Stage 1 Story finding
Making sense	• Stage 2 Storytelling
Making meaning	• Stage 3 Story expanding
Working with meaning	• Stage 4 Story processing
Transformative learning	• Stage 5 Story reconstructing

Table 1: Links between learning and storytelling, McDrury and Alterio (2003, p. 47)

In engaging with this process students were required to develop their stories to guide them through the stages of learning, with the ultimate aim of reaching the stage where transformative learning could take place. This paper uses illustrative examples from six students to demonstrate how they engaged with this process. The data presented below were gathered during the course of the module using reflective diaries and exercises. Students were asked to complete the exercises on a weekly basis in order to chart their progress and to demonstrate their journey as learners through the stages of the model. In total 34 students undertook the module. Out of this group a sample of 6 volunteer students consented to their feedback being used, in the form of extracts from the learning diaries, to illustrate key issues raised by the process of story development and its impact of the process on their reflective learning. Details of the students' characteristics are not reported here to protect their anonymity.

### **Stage 1: Story finding: Noticing**

The first stage of the process, which took place in the early part of the module, provided students with guidance on how to find appropriate examples using Tripp's (1993) definition of critical incidents. Further requirements were that the incident for scrutiny had to be drawn from prior work experience which they felt was relevant to them both personally and professionally. Each critical incident provided the potential for exploration and discovery about what meanings the incident held for them, what they could learn from the situation identified and how the process of exploration of the critical incident could help to improve their understanding of how they learned. A critical incident was defined as a work-based incident that made them stop and think. Students were guided in the process of finding a meaningful critical incident by being made aware that normally a critical incident is associated with emotions which can range from positive feelings, such as pride and self confidence, to negative feelings, such as anxiety. The emotional context of the critical incident was considered relevant as this insight and awareness has the potential to act as an internal barometer to behaviours and the identification of such can aid self discovery (see Table 2).

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Meeting the challenge of devising a programme of events at a 5* hotel</li><li>2. Handling a lightening strike at a holiday resort</li><li>3. Overcoming team leadership difficulties at a wedding reception</li><li>4. Left in charge – taking on responsibility for a department in a private leisure centre</li><li>5. Challenges in promoting a tourism venue overseas</li><li>6. Building self confidence by managing an event at a county showground</li></ol> |
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**Table 2: Brief descriptions of the students' critical incidents**

### **Stage 2: Storytelling: Making sense**

The next stage involved the students organising and ordering some further thoughts about their critical incident. To help with this process each student was asked to write a postcard, adapted from McDrury and Alterio (2003, p. 68), to one of their tutors giving a brief account of their critical incident. The guidance was that the description should be no longer than 50 words, it should begin with either, "It was a great day when..." or "It was a bad day when..." and that it should indicate how their situation had either helped them to learn or made them question aspects of their working practices.

On completion of the postcard exercise, students undertook an hour-long classroom-based exercise designed to demonstrate the four stages in reflective writing using a resource entitled "The Park Exercise" (Moon, 2004). This exercise was used to help students understand the different levels of reflective writing so that they could develop writing skills which demonstrated critical thinking. Each student was required to read and comment on the style and content of each version of the incident before moving on to the next stage. The example illustrated by Moon (2004) is a description of an incident in a park where there is, initially, little attempt to focus on particular aspects of the scenario. As the quality of reflection develops so too does the ability to stand back, self question and examine multiple perspectives on the scenario (Moon, 2000).

### **Stage 3: Story expanding: Making meaning**

The third stage was designed to help students deepen their learning from their identified critical incident, "to reshape, reassess and reconstruct particular events...by encouraging them to extract new meanings from it" (McDrury & Alterio, 2003, p. 86). The purpose of this stage, supported by peer mentors, was to encourage further exploration and to consider new and deeper perspectives on the situations presented, so that they could expand their critical incident into a story of how they had developed their skills in preparation for presentation at a mock interview situation. Using a class-based exercise, on "listeners shaping stories" (McDrury & Alterio, 2003, p. 88), peer mentors asked questions such as: "When and where did this story happen?"; "How did others react?"; "Why do you think things happened the way they did?"; "who was involved?" Such questioning was key to helping students reflect on how their experiences might be used in the interview context, as one student commented:

My mentor asked me to consider why I enjoyed being given responsibility over other team leaders and to explain what this extra responsibility might mean to a potential employer.

The peer mentors then recounted the story as they heard it, giving the student opportunity to explain and clarify their story. For some students the value of the mentor was clear in their feedback. As one student said:

The feedback I received from my mentor was very helpful and I was able to incorporate these ideas into my next story draft. This experience has encouraged me to sell myself in an interview situation and not to feel arrogant about highlighting my strengths.

After class, students continued developing their stories through email contact with their mentors. This on-going contact prolonged the period of reflection, enabling students to evaluate the way they had told their stories and to be critical about what they had learned from the experience, as evidenced in this quote:

After emailing my story to my mentor I received some questions and comments that helped me to look at situations more objectively. The questions such as: Is there anything you would change for future sales events?; enabled me to challenge my previous assumptions.

For some students this phase of the process was vital in enhancing their confidence in their ability not only to identify and discuss the critical incident itself but also to respond positively to critical feedback, as this quote illustrates:

I was told I had a really good story which demonstrated my competencies well although there were areas which needed improving. I can now use this beneficial criticism and review my story.

### **Stage 4: Story processing (Working with meaning)**

Students were then asked to consider Schon's (1983) theory of reflection-in-action (during an event) and reflection-on-action (after an event had taken place). In particular, Schon differentiated between "hard high ground" and "swampy low ground". As McDrury and Alterio (2003) explain, swampy low ground is where there is constant change and hard high ground is a place where competence and confidence develop. This is most likely to occur through reflection-on-action. To learn from previous actions and previous reflections requires a deep level of evaluation and reflection, and finding the opportunity for such reflection to work with meaning at this stage is highly valuable. Atkins and Murphy (1993, cited in McDrury and Alterio, 2003, p. 109) highlighted five key requirements for this to take place:

1. Self awareness (particularly of feelings surrounding an event).
2. Description of the event.

3. Critical analysis which means examining the relevance of existing knowledge, challenging assumptions and imagining alternatives.
4. Synthesis which means the finding of new meanings and new perspectives.
5. Evaluation which means making judgements about the value of something.

Using this framework, students were tasked with extracting new and multiple meanings from their stories using, as a catalyst, the simple technique of creating a straightforward linear story for further development. This technique begins with consideration of the following issues:

- the context of the story
- the main characters in the story
- the main actions that took place
- the key turning points or landmarks in the story
- images, photographs and metaphors associated with the story

An extract from Student 5's linear story demonstrates the need for a basic story plot to provide a framework for further critical development:

It was a stormy night and despite tropical storms being normal at this time of year, this one in particular had everyone feeling a little wary. Whilst on duty we heard a huge crash and vibration throughout the building. Alarms were going off and phone lines were dead. I was the senior member of staff on duty therefore it was my responsibility to make sure that everyone was safe and the situation was handled effectively and efficiently. Thinking quickly I called the fire department and although in a panic I instructed other members of staff to assist me in securing the building. I ran out of the main entrance and into the storm and noticed the smoke...

Students were then asked to comment on the story processing stage, particularly in relation to demonstrating their understanding of double loop learning. The key issue here was for students to show that they understood their own learning processes and had reconsidered their experiences to uncover new meanings. A sample of student insights from the story processing stage is given:

Based on my original story, I could identify and include a couple of my personal weaknesses, as it is important to demonstrate an awareness of skills that I am perhaps not so proficient in. Consequently, this would show a potential employer that I acknowledge these are areas I could improve upon and that I recognize what these areas are. If the employer asked me to expand upon these, I could highlight measures that I am taking to further develop myself. (Student 1)

Adopting 'double loop' learning theory I was able to develop my original ideas by critically evaluating my actions and gaining a better perspective, not just on the situation (in my story) but also on my personal emotions. My final story expressed my main skills and strengths, also allowing room for future development. (Student 2)

Storytelling has helped me to learn what I have learned! The experience enabled me to build a complex picture of my reality including skills that I have and those I need to develop. I was able to construct a personal action plan, based on what I learned about myself from the storytelling experience, including the need to improve my confidence around strangers and my time management skills. (Student 4)

### **Stage 5: Story reconstructing: Transformative learning**

During the final stage of the process, evidence of transformative learning was sought. This is closely related to a deeper level of critical reflection and requires:

- synthesis: finding new meanings and new perspectives
- evaluation: making judgments about the value of something (Atkins & Murphy, 1993)

Such evidence was presented as digital stories, which are media artefacts that combine a narrated audio-text with still images to tell a story using freely downloadable software or student's own digital images. The key aim of this stage of the project was to encourage students to demonstrate transformative learning as a result of their reflections. This process provided many useful insights such as digital story evidence of the ability to deal with the emotional challenges of taking on the role of duty manager in a leisure centre.

#### Student evaluation of the process of learning

Using McDrury and Alterio's (2003) model, during the module students engaged in critical reflection using a clearly defined and staged process based on sound academic models. Each student focused on experiences which were highly relevant to their own personal and professional development in an innovative and peer-supported environment. This storytelling technique gave students the means with which to understand and make sense of learning so that this could be articulated more effectively. Through the formal mechanism of module evaluation, students were asked to comment on the process they had undertaken. The following points, extracted from module evaluations, highlight key issues raised by the students indicating that they could see the value of this innovative approach to critical reflection in deepening their understanding of some of their work place experiences.

I find it a lot easier to write a narrative than to write an essay because it is personal – you write something and you can reread it over and over again and make changes to it whereas with a report you just get fed up with it in the end.

Under instruction from the module tutor they could easily identify a critical incident, as defined by Tripp (1933), which was personally meaningful and this was something they welcomed from the outset of the process as this quote illustrates:

I think that starting from critical incidents has shown us that it doesn't matter what you do, or how insignificant you think it is you can learn from it...even if its something that you have done wrong you can still learn from it.

The role of emotion, identified by Moon (2000) as significant in the process of reflective learning, was significant and students quickly developed ownership of their story as well as an ability to be reflective and self-critical, and to perceive themselves in relation to others, as this student stated:

I think that when you're telling a story to other people you kind of think about your feelings rather than just what happened. That is valuable.

The postcard exercise provided a useful starting point for the storytelling process, where students could identify a situation in which they felt they had an opportunity to learn whilst on placement. In writing about these situations, the natural tendency was for learners to describe events. Therefore, undertaking The Park exercise (Moon, 2000) enabled them to see how writing style could change to demonstrate stages in the process of critical reflection:

I look at the first stage (of storytelling) and there is such a massive gap between where we began and where we ended. If you compare them, one is very descriptive and one is not descriptive at all. It's all to do with emotions and reflecting and you don't realize that you are doing it but its great that you have to.

Students welcomed the opportunity for reflection time and felt they could engage with their learning at a deeply personal level. As one student said:

I did so many things on my placement that I had never done before. If I did something and it went well I'd say "that's fine" and move on. It wasn't until I'd finished my placement and had to do this module that I realised how much I had done whether it turned out to be good or bad. I am probably much more aware (as a result of this storytelling process). If I approach new projects I would make sure I was well briefed and well prepared...rather than just think it will be fine and hope that it will.

They valued the collaborative learning process in creating multiple perspectives on stories using support from peer mentors. Developing the skill of critical reflection is a process which takes time and can work effectively when facilitated by peers. Students were capable of grappling with and applying theories of learning by working with stories of personal development and were capable, through the creation of digital stories, of demonstrating how their learning could be transferred to a new circumstance such as the development of an interview story.

There is one thing I definitely found doing my story - I was putting in points that I had assumed because I had been working with a system for such a long time. It was only when I was asked to "elaborate on this" by my mentor that I saw that people may not understand what I was getting at...I was actually kind of arrogant!

The students valued working with digital stories as an innovative communication tool which would enable them to confidently share their experiences and learning with wider audiences such as potential employers and other academic situations as this example shows:

It's quite a good outcome. We've got something to show for all the work we have done and that is a good thing for our CV. I think Photostory 3 is quite a nice programme to use possibly for future presentations...to use some form of story to illustrate a point, or a piece of theory or a case study.

Finally, they felt they could see transformation in their own learning by following the process outlined in McDrury and Alterio's (2003, p. 47) model and applying their learning to new situations.

When you write a story it's apparent that you are actually talking to a wider audience and that is when you go from being simple into a step by step very detailed, precise, analytical explanation of an event.

## Conclusions

Developing skills in critical reflection poses challenges and questions for the future. Transformative learning implies changed behaviour arising from critical reflections and planned actions resulting from the reflective process. However, the demonstration of such changed behaviour is challenging. The storytelling technique goes some way to helping students meet this challenge. It supports them to construct their own meaning from the knowledge they are acquiring by equipping them with a process that provides a model for reflective learning, as well as time and space for reflection to occur. Gradually they have the opportunity to build awareness, confidence and understanding of themselves as learners with the support of peers. It is also recognised that every learner is different and the method may suit some more than others. Some students find this process easier than others and the challenge will be to encourage the cynical or disenfranchised learner. The peer support element of the approach goes some way to tackling this problem, although this needs to be carefully embedded and monitored within the design of the module with clear guidance being offered by tutors. Selling the idea of transformative learning through storytelling to academic staff may be a challenge best addressed by the production of clear evidence of reflective learning from the students themselves in the form of digital stories clearly contextualised within leisure, tourism and hospitality settings. This approach certainly offers several opportunities to encourage students to better understand their own learning processes and, in so doing, relate these to their own self-development and to future employability.

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