

BLOGGING MY REFLECTIONS? NO I DON'T.... BUT IT'S A GOOD IDEA

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Abstract

It is now widely accepted that technology plays a pivotal role in our daily lives, from organising our diaries, to communicating between likeminded individuals and enabling instantaneous choice; consequently web 2.0 tools have become highly valued and prized within higher education settings.

Increasingly, due to the availability of mobile devices, rapid expansion in technology and perceived benefits to both student and institution, the advent of blended learning techniques, has assumed that all undergraduate students are digitally literate. Students are increasingly expected to engage with the technology as a replacement for face-to-face activities. Blogs, for example, are beginning to replace face to face activity, for reflective practice and online forum discussions replacing seminars.

Reflective journals are employed in higher education as a tool to engage students on professional programmes in reflective practice. Reflective journaling, as depicted by Moon [1] is viewed as an art form; as a representation of the individual's professional artistry [2]. However, increasingly reflective journals are used as a tool to enable students to discuss their thinking and behaviours in relation to predetermined outcomes, professional standards and values. This development arguably transfers reflection from an activity undertaken to transform and develop professional practice, to yet another activity on the students' to-do-list that must be completed in order to achieve competencies; arguably resulting in reflective practice becoming a means-to-end practice rather than a guide of action [3].

It was questioned whether students' use of technology to produce pieces of reflection undermined the shared value of reflective practice. Consequently, this study listened to the lived experiences of students as they navigate the technology and the tools in order to complete their undergraduate degree programmes,

This research utilised unstructured interviews in order to engage the participants in reflection on their experiences and underpinning value systems. This research listened to student's experiences of writing reflective blogs on their work based placement experiences and found incongruence between the value and beliefs of reflective writing and thinking, and their performance and motivation to complete the blogs. The students discussed the benefits of thinking and writing reflectively, specifically in relation to developing professional practice. However they also spoke of their difficulties in completing the task, as it was seen either as additional or superfluous to their academic studies and assessments, or as a task which positioned them precariously on the edge or outside of the profession, due to the nature of the relationship between student and commenter on the blogs. In contrast, other web 2.0 tools used as alternates to face to face teaching sessions were seen as a benefit to their academic studies, with few barriers to participation. Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour [4] is used to explain the relationship between the students' values and beliefs and actual behaviour, highlighting the role of social influence and in particular the relationships between student and lecturer and student peers in the production of reflective writing and transition within the community of practice. The paper concludes with the author's ruminations on how these relationships can be supported in order to improve the students' experience.

Keywords: reflection, higher education, blogs, psychology.

1 INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice is heralded by many as the tool to enable students to transform from novice to competent practitioner, through self-analysis, increasing self-awareness and critiquing taken-for-granted assumptions [1,2]. Indeed the Health and Care Professions Council [5,6], who monitor the quality of pre-registration health and social care training programmes in the UK dictate that pre-registration programmes must support and develop reflective thinking. Additionally that post registration professionals must continue to value the importance of reflecting on practice and the

recording of this reflection, consequently reflective journals are employed in higher education as a tool to engage students on professional programmes in reflective practice.

Writing to support reflective thinking is an established practice. In 1962 Vygotsky [7] argued that writing was more effective than speech as it required a higher level of abstraction and intellectualisation. Research on the use of reflective journals has echoed his view, highlighting the value of reflective journals as a place to explore behaviours, consider critical transformative practice and develop professional identity [1,8]. However, how the student is introduced to and supported during writing, as well as individual factors such as time and motivation impact on the continued use of reflective journals [9,10,11]. In addition, the individual's view of the purpose of the journals; as a record, motivator or extension of their reflective thinking, impacts on their motivation (see Bain et al [12]). It is argued that this perception of purpose also impacts on the content of the written prose; content based, self-authorship and transformative [13]. Therefore individuals who value reflective writing and view it as an extension to their reflective thinking will begin to transform their everyday practice. Whereas those who view reflective writing as a record of their activities, are more likely to write content driven reflections and view the practice as a means-to-end or as an item on their to-do list.

Increasingly, due to the availability of mobile devices, rapid expansion in technology and assumption of digital literacy undergraduate students are encouraged to maintain a blog rather than a paper journal. Blogs are personal webpages, which the author is able to record and update a series of journal entries in reverse chronological order. Where an individual publishes their blog will dictate the potential audience, with some institutions encouraging the use of public sites, others like my own, utilise web 2.0 tools which enable the author to select their audience by name. One of the main benefits of blogs is that the individual is in control of the time and space that they utilise for the activity of reflective thinking.

Whilst it is argued that the underlining process of reflective thinking does not differ between the two formats, the production of blogs not only relies on the digital literacy of the author, but also increases the likelihood of a differentiation between private reflection and reflection for public consumption, particularly when multiple readers are envisaged; a practice common in the supervision of undergraduate students. However a number of authors have suggested that e-formats have resulted in increased number of emotions portrayed within the text and a greater ease in discussing sensitive information [14,15], due to perceived anonymity and distance between self and audience.

Taking these factors into account, this research aimed to explore the lived experiences of students using blogs for reflective practice;

- to ascertain their perceptions on the value of using blogs as a means to reflect on practice; and
- to gain insight into the factors which impact on their production of the journals.

2 METHOD

The research was a small scale study, utilising unstructured interviews in order to hear the students' lived experiences. Ethical approval was granted by the University of St Mark and St John.

2.1 Participants

The participants were recruited through the pre-registration speech and language therapy programme. This programme was chosen as use of web 2.0 tools to support teaching and learning activities has been embedded in the programme for a number of years, therefore all the students have had experience of writing reflective journals via blogs, using discussion boards and other tools as alternates to face-to-face sessions. In this small scale study, 6 undergraduate students volunteered to be interviewed. The participants were all female, which due to the small sample, is representative of the wider population of the students' future profession. Three participants had entered their final year of the programme, two were mid programme and one participant was within the first 12 months of their degree programme.

2.2 Study procedure

Prior to attending the interview, the participants were given information about the research and a list of suggested topics for the interview, to aid reflection, recall and memory [16]. All the interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed in preparation for analysis.

It was decided that unstructured interviews were the most valuable data collection tool for this topic because the research was aiming to hear and listen to their experiences, rather than set the route for the journey of discovery [17]. The interviews ranged in length from 17 to 35 minutes.

The aim of qualitative data analysis is two-fold; firstly, it is to interpret the experiences of the students through a reading of their descriptions and explanations. Secondly it is to offer an explanation and interpretation of their experiences within their individual contexts and the social, cultural and political contexts that they are located in. In order to encompass both aims of analysis it was decided to utilise Borkan's [18] approach to data analysis; using vertical and horizontal analysis.

Vertical analysis is the process of analysing one-section, a single transcript, prior to considering the rest of the data. This form of analysis maintains the individual, their identity and experiences which may become lost in a thematic approach and improves the internal consistency of the data [19]. Memos were made of the emerging codes from each individual transcript prior to holistically observing the data. Horizontal analysis included the constant comparison of codes and data between the individual participants in order to identify major and minor themes and the identification of deviant data in order to interrogate the identified themes and subsequent conclusions [20]. Each subtheme was individually analysed to take into account individual participant contexts and broader political, social and cultural contexts. In qualitative research it is recognised that analysis is an on-going process and that it continues within the writing and representation of the findings. At this point of writing, in relation to the research aims, the following themes have been identified; choice and control and normative behaviour. These are discussed in the following section.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants demonstrated a shared understanding and values of reflective practice which were congruent with the previously published literature. The benefits included; enabling focused time to address practice and identification of new ideas and solutions to difficulties; allowing for greater self-awareness to develop; and the transition from rumination to exploration and analytical thinking. Likewise, none of the participants found utilising web 2.0 tools problematic, suggesting that these tools, alongside other resources, such as social media, have become an integrated element of modern day undergraduate lifestyles.

Further to this, collectively the participants indicated that they thought the process of blogging for reflection was a beneficial behaviour to their professional development, one participant stated;

"I think it's your job to explore those feelings and why you had them." (p1)

The participants had all experienced a professional, either lecturer or clinician, reading the blogs and commenting on them. This was valued by the participants, who suggested that regular feedback was helpful as it made them feel supported, that they were "on the right track" (p2) and that their questions were answered from a position of knowledge.

3.1 Choice

However, the participants appeared to collectively suggest that using blogs for reflective practice was not something they actively participated in out of choice. Choice was a recurring theme within the interviews, with some participants suggesting that the compulsory nature of the blogs in the first few months of their undergraduate degree programme, was particularly problematic as it made reflective practice become "effortful" (p4). This echoes the assertions of a number of proponents of reflective journaling who suggest that writing is effortful because it problematizes seemingly fine practice and questions taken-for-granted assumptions [21,22].

Likewise other participants stated that this decision not to write, stemmed from it being a "a slog" an "extra job to do". It is suggested that these participants viewed the purpose of reflective writing as a record of their thinking, rather than as a means to transform their practice. Indeed one participant stated that she chose not to record her reflections as it would be repeating information from her clinical log; a record of the clients and conditions she has seen, indicating that to her, the focus of reflective writing on the patients she has worked with rather than her own practice.

Another participant recalled how she had readily questioned the benefit of the practice as it would not impact on her final grade outcomes for the academic year. In higher education due to the focus of compulsory education on targets and measureable achievement, many students initially struggle with self-directed learning and learning for development rather than for achievement. Whilst this does not

diminish the process of reflective thinking, it does remind us of Freire's [3] warning that maintaining this view encourages reflection to become a means-to-end rather than a guide of action.

Once outside of the period of compulsory blogging, the participants discussed how they chose to reflect and record their reflections. It became increasingly apparent that the greater the level of freedom and choice offered to the participants around the structure, content and timing of the reflective writing, the less likely they were to reflect in depth with a sense of criticality. A number of the participants spoke of using a 'version' of a recognised model of reflection; others described how they had moved from regular reflection to only reflecting upon critical incidents. Critical incident reports are short narrative accounts of a single event, whilst Mezirow [23] argues that critical incident reporting encourages transformative learning, to view this would require an analysis of the participants blogs, which was outside of the remit of this study. Therefore, from the information they shared it can only be suggested that their use of critical incident reporting was a short cut, as a means to indicate that they are achieving the standard set by the programme and Health and Care Professions Council [6].

3.2 Social Norms

The participants who were on work base placements reflected on how the content of their reflections could impact on their success on the programme. However, in contrast to the questioning of the usefulness in relation to outcomes which occurred earlier in their degree programmes, they were more concerned that the content would be read by experienced members of the profession who were then in a position to assess and judge them in relation to their skills of working in the workplace. A number of the participants stated that they chose not to make public their reflections due to this fear, or when public consumption was requested by their work-base supervisor, they would amend the content or reduce the honesty. This fear appears to reflect the findings of Jones [24] who identified a range of criticisms of reflective writing including problems of confidentiality, identification of poor practice and inaccurate recall.

Indeed within the profession it is widely accepted that reflective practice underpins professional development [25] and that less experienced members of the profession should be supported by those with experience. The participants reflected these values stating that they preferred to reflect through conversation with another, preferably experienced, individual as this reduced the risk of written words being misinterpreted, the perception of permanence and enabled them to judge the emotional environment of the conversation. This further indicates the acceptance that reflection is emotional work as well as cognitive analysis, suggesting that the participants value reflective thinking, but not the process of writing reflectively.

Many of the participants described their need to write reflections according to the anticipated audience. They disclosed discomfort and in some, fear, about their blogs and written record being read and commented upon by experienced members of the profession. This is in direct conflict to their statements indicating that they valued the process of feedback and comment, indicating that other factors must be present influencing their appraisal of the process. It could be argued that by allowing experienced members of the profession to view their thinking, the participants were feeling vulnerable in their position within the community of the profession, that their reflections would perhaps demonstrate that they do not match the norms of the group, leaving their professional identity in question. Of particular note, one participant indicated that they found greater motivation to complete reflective blogs, when they were not receiving feedback from others, bar a recognition that the blogs had been completed; indicating they were motivated by the recognition that they are matching the descriptive norms of the group, but injunctive norms [26] had little value. Likewise, Chu et al [27] also found that staff feedback was not valued, however in their research this devaluation stemmed from irregular feedback rather than fear in relation to the content of the feedback.

The comparing of self to the norms of the group was evident in the participants' descriptions on their discussions with other student peers about reflection and blogging. One participant disclosed that a peer had received a comment on a blog, which she interpreted as a criticism of her emotions; this incident resulted in a number of her peers ceasing to blog their honest reflections. This arguably undermines the value of reflective practice as artistry [1] and indicates that the participants, and to an extent infers that their peers, view reflective writing as an item on a to-do list. This statement also highlights the secondary group of social norms that the participants belonged to, not only were they negotiating their behaviours in light of professional norms, but they were also comparing themselves to the norms, values and behaviours of their peer group.

3.3 Theory of Planned behaviour

It is argued that the Theory of Planned behaviour [4] can be utilised to explain the discord between the high regard and value the participants placed on reflective practice and the behaviour of writing for reflection. The Theory of planned behaviour (see figure 1) was first developed by Ajzen as an extension of the theory of reasoned action. Ajzen [4] argued that behaviour, normative and control beliefs influence and individual's intention to perform a specific behaviour.

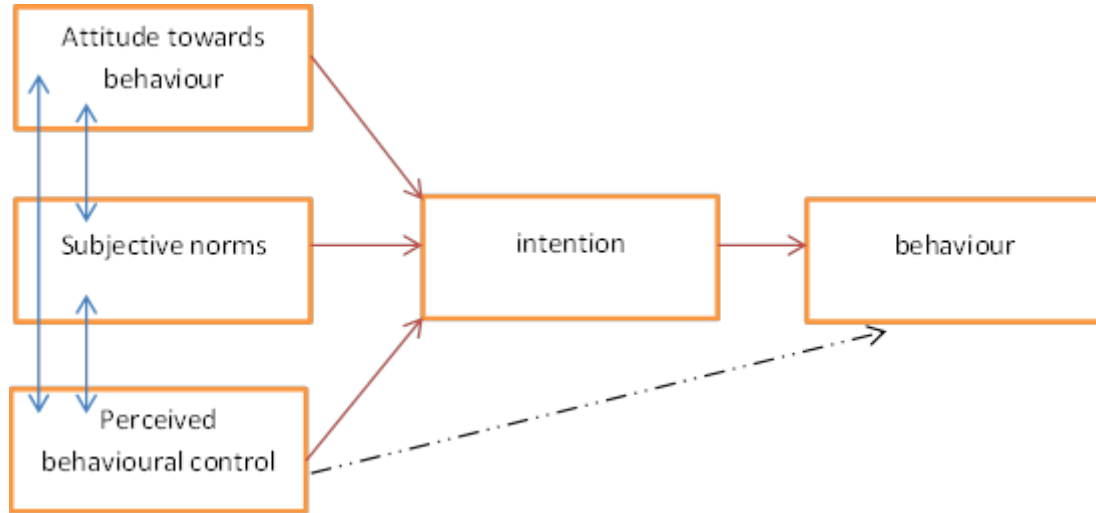


Figure 1: Theory of Planned behaviour [4]

Figure 2 briefly depicts how the three beliefs; behaviour, subjective norms and perceived control influence the participants' intention to blog or write for reflection.

3.3.1 Attitude toward behaviour

It can be seen how the cognitive appraisals increase the likelihood of the behaviour occurring, having whereas the affective appraisal; appears to have collectively concluded that participating in the behaviour is effortful and hard emotional work, consequently decreasing likelihood of performance.

3.3.2 Subjective Norms

Likewise in relation to subjective norms, matching the descriptive norms of the profession increases likelihood as reflective practice and writing for reflection is highly valued within the profession; whereas the influence of injunctive norms and experienced others within the group both promotes and demotes the likelihood of the performance. However, it should be recognised that this also depends on the nature of the feedback or comment proffered by the experienced professionals. Additionally, the participant's peer group influenced their decision making.

3.3.3 Perceived behavioural Control

The participants' sense of control over the structure, content and completion of the activity appeared to influence their motivation to participate. Notably when this control was perceived to have been given to external parties their intention to reflect as a means to represent their professional artistry and develop their professional practice was diminished.

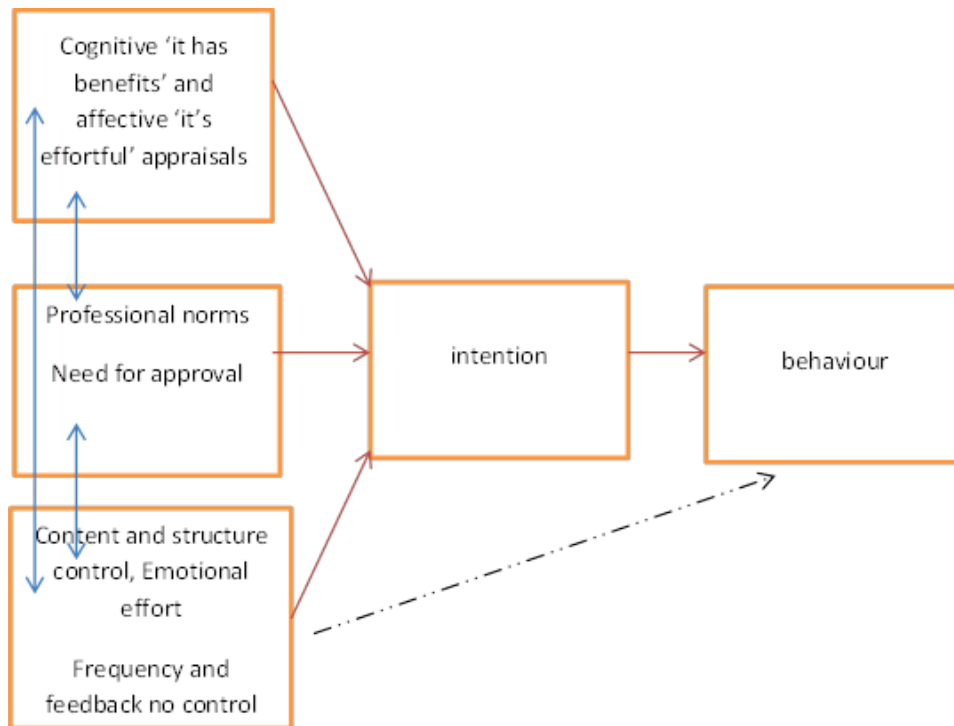


Figure 2; factors influencing intention to blog for reflection

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings reflect the experiences of a few; the research was a small scale study, focussing on the experiences of students on one undergraduate programme in one institution of Higher Education in the UK. Therefore the findings are not directly generalizable to the wider population, and the implications may only be applicable to my own institution, therefore the following is meant to encourage conversation rather than imply practice changes.

As a practitioner in Higher Education, who values reflective practice, I am left to contemplate how my practice and that of others may need to adapt as a result of this research. It could be argued that professionals involved in the support of students by providing comment and feedback on blogs and reflective writing need greater awareness of the potential impact of their input. However this raised awareness could lead to increased uniformity in expectations of content and structure and increasing the movement of reflective writing and blogging towards reflection for surveillance rather than professional artistry.

Likewise it could be argued that students should be given control on the structure, content and timing of their reflective blogs, removing the compulsory element to re-engage intention to blog for reflection. However this could lead to implicit encouragement of 'taking the easy option', by editing reflection and the use of models, to reduce the emotional turmoil and rumination [28] which is often viewed as an integral part of reflection and to reduce the level of criticality within their reflective writing.

Finally, it might be beneficial to work with each individual student and encourage them to reflect on their process of reflection and identify the factors which influence their choices and decision making, for some students this would be to be highly scaffolded [7], but would encourage transformative practice and potentially increase blogging and writing for reflection.

To conclude reflective practice is a highly valued element of the profession, which was clearly shared by the participants. However this value base was not enough to support regular writing for reflection, as other factors such as audience, peers, fear and workload had a greater influence on their intention and behaviour.

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