Article

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS, AND THE BENEFITS OF BEING A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

David Woodward, Shannon Booth, Elise Allen,
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INTRODUCTION

As tertiary educators, our Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education (Level 7) (GDTE) research group, previously considered developing a teaching philosophy for a teaching credential and the enablers, challenges and use of metaphor employed in this process (Woodward et al., 2019). Subsequently, we considered our early impressions of teaching practice, enablers and challenges and made recommendations for improvement (Woodward et al., 2022).

Previous research on constructivism and reflective practice, as an evidence-based approach (Cullen et al., 2017) to tertiary teaching practice (Woodward et al., 2021), concluded that constructivism provides the vehicle for learner empowerment and was the most widely used pedagogical framework employed by educators for Otago Polytechnic (OP) learners (Woodward et al., 2020).

More recently, we decided to unpack the constructivist model of teaching and learning and explore the use of reflective practice. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in the process of continuous learning (Schön, 1983).

Our GDTE research group collaborated in a Community of Practice (CoP), to write a research article on the use of reflective practice at OP. We set out to investigate how OP educators use reflective practice in their daily lives, how educators encourage use of reflective practice in their learners, and what educators consider are the benefits to learners of being a reflective practitioner.

METHODOLOGY

Henry et al. (2020) identified Communities of Practice as an effective social constructivist tool for building trust and a sense of belonging, sharing of enterprise and enhancing the reflectivity that is a precursor to independent learning. We therefore employed this social constructivist (Palincsar, 1998) approach to mine information from interviewees, all OP lecturers, or facilitators, using an autoethnographic approach (Maréchal, 2010) involving reflection on teaching experience. The GDTE CoP research group met online on a regular (fortnightly) basis to explore the research questions, with all interviewees being members of the CoP and co-authors of the present article.

FINDINGS

What reflective practice do you use as an educator in your daily life?

As a veterinary nursing educator, Clare encourages her work colleagues to incorporate reflective practices, not only in the classroom with their learners, but in their personal lives as well. The veterinary industry is a fast paced and stressful environment which can lead to compassion fatigue, so it is a key aspect to teach both herself and her learners how to be reflective practitioners. Compassion fatigue can be described as the loss of ability to care due to emotional and physical exhaustion and be characterised by loss of empathy or compassion towards co-workers and patients (Foote, 2020). Reflection can be a useful tool in helping to take a positive step towards understanding mental health in the workplace and combating compassion fatigue and burnout. Personally, Clare undertakes reflection by getting outside in her garden; it is here that she can think through past situations and experiences and develop plans for moving forwards.

Shannon describes herself as a deep thinker and a natural reflector. Being reflective is part of her personality and shapes who she is. "My reflective lenses are not something I choose to put on and take off," she says, "they just 'are'. It is part of an innate desire for self-improvement, and I view the world as my classroom, where every interaction is an opportunity to learn and grow." Shannon used her journey to become a lecturer at the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health, as an example of this in practice.

> It was a long and diverse process to get here, but I always knew that this was what I wanted to do. So, for years I sat through department meetings, listened to other people's presentations, experienced other lecturer's lessons and teaching styles as a student, and thought about the way they communicated, the way they connected or did not connect with me, and I continuously reflected on all these experiences, and still do now, to shape the way I choose to teach today, now that I am finally in that role.

Elise, who is a lecturer in Information Technology (IT), has formed the habit of reflection both as an educator and in daily life. Reflection can be formal, for example annotating a lesson plan with ideas of how to improve the lesson next time, or informal such as making a mental note to communicate more clearly with a particular learner.

As an educator, Elise has found that both formal and informal reflection has been the driver of many beneficial outcomes professionally and for the department. Particularly beneficial has been the reflective processes enabled by co-teaching (Admiraal et al., 2022) as a natural part of lecturer discussion in the classroom. This informal, collaborative reflective process of discussing what does and does not work for learners and the curriculum, has led to significant improvements in learning design within the programme (Allen et. al., 2021).

Elise views reflection in daily life as the process of interpreting the consequences of actions and decisions and using this understanding to inform future decisions. The process of continual learning afforded by such reflection is the basis of accumulating "life experience" and underlies the idea of wisdom. Examples from daily life might include using past experience to inform the planning of a trip out of town or becoming a better gardener by keeping a gardening diary to record successful and unsuccessful crops and conditions.

Bringing a broad systems view and lenses of environmentalism and equity, Alexa, who works with learners studying the Master of Professional Practice and Bachelor of Applied Management, has a strong reflective approach that over many years of practice is now quite automatic. She first cultivated the habit as a learner who needed the discipline of studying her own reactions as well as the impact of actions. Kolb's reflective cycle was her introduction to the process (Kolb, 1984). Over the years, many other similar cycles made their way into her practice and thinking until eventually reflection was just a part of all work and private life. Alexa engages

in formal and informal reflective practice. Formal is erratic but takes the form of journalling when the world seems complicated. Informal is discussions with friends, colleagues and even self, without fear of vulnerability or surfacing emotions. This includes acceptance of emotions surfacing for processing. Reflection is a big part of developing emotional intelligence and trust in that intelligence. She finds a reflective process freeing, settling and capable of deepening friendships and collegiality even within a busy lifestyle.

How do you encourage reflective practice in your learners?

In veterinary nursing education, Clare felt they did not use reflective practice as much as they could. The aim is to develop and use this skill more effectively with her learners and educators, by embedding reflective practice in all the new Animal Healthcare and Veterinary Nursing programmes now being developed and offered from 2023 onwards. By using a simple three step model such as the "What? So What? Now What?" reflective model (Borton, 1970; Rolfe et al., 2001) and tailoring the prompt questions to suit the situation, she can introduce reflective practice to her learners in an easy and simple method. For the more adept learners, she can use a more in-depth form of reflective model, such as the Gibbs reflective model (Gibbs, 1998), where this brings in the awareness of feelings and analysing the perceptions of those involved. The students are encouraged to also consider the animals' viewpoint as well as their colleagues'. Journals can be used as a way of encouraging and developing the learners' reflective writing through providing feedback and feedforward from the educator.

At the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health (ISEH) where Shannon teaches, the programmes have a strong focus on experiential learning opportunities (Kolb, 1984; Ministry of Education, 2023), which fits well with reflective practice. Their students participate in practical, authentic learning opportunities through work integrated learning placements, and are then encouraged to reflect on these experiences. As described in the ISEH Student Guide:

> Students engage in a learning cycle whereby they participate in an activity, reflect on that experience (think about it and ask questions about 'what?'), explore abstract concepts (ideas, theory, and beliefs 'so what?') and make connections (linking, relationships, and correlations – 'now what?') between this theory and the learner's actual experiences. Through this process new learning takes place and can then be applied to new activities and to work contexts. (Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health, 2023, p. 3)

These reflections are shared with classmates, mentors and teachers through formal and informal conversations, classroom discussions, presentations, and formal e-portfolios. The aim is to enhance students' learning through the ongoing cycle of experience/activity, reflection, and transfer of learning into action from one situation to another.

In the Bachelor of IT, Elise and her colleagues used reflective practice as educators to develop a curriculum with learner reflection at the heart. This is best represented in the series of courses called Studio (Allen et. al., 2021), in which experiences are carefully curated such that learners in teams will make mistakes in a safe environment, with the lecturers acting as coaches to manage frustration (Woodward et al., 2021). The Studio approach encompasses a "fail fast" mentality (Ries, 2011), allowing reflective cycles to happen early and often throughout the learning process.

The reflection process is formalised in Studio within the assessment system, which uses Performance and Development Review (PDR) techniques to encourage learners to write about and verbalise what they have learnt as well as allowing direct and personalised feedback from the lecturers. The PDR assessment includes a worksheet with prompt questions that learners answer twice each semester, helping them to identify what is going well for them and what they need to improve as well as encouraging learners to commit to concrete, self-identified actions to improve their own performance in specific areas.

Encouraging reflective practice in learners is a real challenge. Alexa finds some learners unwilling to examine the consequences of their action, so she employs strategies to create a safe place for them to do so. First, and arguably most successful, is to model the behaviour (Bandura, 1976; 1986). If Alexa is not afraid of vulnerability, she makes it safe for her learners to also be unafraid.

Secondly, Alexa provides opportunities for reflection within her facilitation. Usually, she uses Borton's simple framework: "What? So What? Now What?" (Borton, 1970; Rolfe et al., 2001). In a class scenario, this helps people reflect on their experience and think about what they might do differently in future. Feedback in this process is important so that gaps are not skipped across. This requires non-violent communication (Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2022), which creates a supportive and respectful environment that is honouring and never reductive. Non-violent communication emphasises deep listening and careful language use; for example, "are you willing to share…?" and "I noticed this…".

Lastly, Alexa brings evidence. The work of people like Mezirow (1991), show that transformative learning — that is, a fundamental shift in perspective—is enabled by reflective practice. Mezirow found that reflection empowers people to identify and challenge their own values and so develop higher understandings. The work of Hatton and Smith (1995) shows that learners engaged in reflective practice achieve higher marks because of their associated development of critical thinking skills.

However, none of these strategies work when the learner is not ready to do this thinking. This can be the case where a learner has unresolved deep trauma that can result in resistance to reflective practice; in these cases, Alexa does not push.

What do you consider are the benefits to your learners of being a reflective practitioner?

The benefits for Clare's veterinary nursing learners who undertake reflective practice, is learning the skill of being able to reflect before, during and after an experience or situation, which is essential for practical skills within a veterinary clinic. Schön (1987) talks about reflection in action, a type of reflecting that is done during a situation such as handling a cat and stopping briefly to make minor adjustments to your technique. Over time this becomes a learnt skill, and the learner undertakes that reflection in action with a new situation. Reflecting on action (Schön, 1987) is the act of reflecting after a situation or experience. This could involve writing in a journal or discussions with work colleagues in a 'debrief' meeting. Van Manen (1991) talks about a form of "anticipatory reflecting" which is done before an event that is known to be happening. This could be in the form of a pre-surgical discussion about an operation or procedure scheduled for that day.

Shannon embraces the idea of lifelong learning as being a mindset. Because our world is changing so fast, she believes that we can never have all the answers at any one time. It makes sense to her to both adopt and promote a lifelong learning approach, whereby an individual engages in a continuous process of reflecting (both in action and on action), analysing, and adjusting their practice in relation to the ever-changing requirements of their work and learning environments (Archer, 2007). Comments made by Pearson and Eastes (2022), on their reflective practice podcast, resonated with Shannon when they stated that reflection is:

> …not about ego or proving anything to leaders, or about the desire to be the best, but it is about a personal commitment to wanting to improve day after day; about getting it right for the students and making a lifelong commitment to getting better at what we do to help our students be successful in this ever-changing world.

Thus, Shannon believes the benefits lie in encouraging students to keep learning, to be intellectually curious, to engage in experiential education and reflective practice to help them to develop their own critical thinking and reflection skills, and to help them transfer their learning into action; this ensures they too can continue to improve and get better at what they do.

Similarly, to Shannon, Elise believes the benefits for her learners centre on an attitude of continuous improvement by default. Practising the ability to assess and adjust their own individual performance and performance as a team member will help them to form the habit of reflection. If learners always look to their lecturers for feedback and marks, when would they learn to assess their own performance (which they would need to do in a job)?

This might imply a form of self-assessment event, but reflection is an ongoing process rather than a one-off (Helyer, 2015). Before, during and after a task, we encourage learners to reflect on the intent of the instructions, measure their own performance against the marking schedule, or compare with others in formative tasks. Rather than always tell a learner whether they are doing well or not, it is better to teach them how to judge that for themselves. This does not replace coaching and feedback but is supplementary to those tools. Practising continuous improvement techniques will result in better academic results and translates later into better employees.

In Alexa's experience, reflective learners are also more resilient, more capable of critical analysis, and more able to respond positively to critique. Reflective learners do better (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Reflective learners can transform their thinking by enabling a perspective shift (Mezirow, 1991). Reflective learners better predict results and consequences through using a framework such as Borton's model (Borton, 1970; Rolfe et al., 2001).

DISCUSSION

Within our tertiary educators CoP, we acknowledged that reflective practice can be undertaken informally, during our daily lives while undertaking activities such as exercise (including walking, yoga, gardening), or relaxing (including talking to friends and family, listening to music, baking, reading, meditating, having a massage) (Morton, 2022). More formally, reflective practice can be undertaken while developing lesson plans, writing in a journal or diary, writing a blog or post, writing analytic memos, reflecting on teaching and peer observations (Staples, 2022), through counselling or clinical debriefing, through moderation of assessments and marking schedules, or providing feedback and feedforward.

Reflective practice can be undertaken in anticipation of an activity, "anticipatory reflecting" (Van Manen, 1991), such as reviewing a lesson plan to consider the relevance to the activity about to be undertaken; "reflection in action" (Schön, 1987), while the activity is being undertaken making changes 'on the fly'; or 'reflecting on action', where a review of what happened in a clinic, classroom, workplace, online meeting or programme delivery, is considered.

Many of these informal and formal reflective practices are used by our OP educators. A constructivist approach to embedding reflective practice in our learners was undertaken by our educators with experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), as the pillar. Educators encouraged various models with learners which often reflected the level of the course undertaken. Simple models such as the "What?, So What?, Now What?" reflective model (Borton, 1970; Rolfe et al., 2001), were used in veterinary nursing and at the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health, where Shannon used work integrated learning placements (work experience), to provide learning cycles of reflection on experience shared with classmates, mentors and teachers through formal and informal conversations, classroom discussions, presentations and formal e-portfolios. Journalling was also used at entry level practical qualifications such as in apiculture and veterinary nursing classes, using diaries to reflect on practical activities undertaken and action required moving forward if a similar situation arose again.

Elise, working in the IT area, used several constructivist models, particularly in "Studio" courses where learners work in groups. This included social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), as group work encourages learners to learn from one another using collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994), and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), making use of cycles of doing and reflecting including, importantly, allowing learners to make and learn from mistakes in an inclusive environment (Allen et al., 2021; Woodward et al., 2021).

Alexa also provides a safe, inclusive online learning environment, where she models behaviours of reflecting (Bandura, 1976), for students to feel comfortable to do the same and make mistakes, providing formative and summative feedback.

With more advanced Level 6 veterinary nursing students, Clare uses the Gibbs reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1998), particularly in coursework where assignments require reflective writing. This model analyses and evaluates, as well as considers feelings and emotions.

At the postgraduate Master and Doctor of Professional Practice level at Capable NZ, reflective practice is incorporated through journalling and analytic memos to develop a critical commentary or reflective summary using an autoethnographic (Maréchal, 2010) approach to demonstrate a transformative development (Mezirow, 1991), in one's professional framework of practice.

As Shannon has indicated, reflective practice is a life-long process which allows learners to reflect, analyse, adjust, adapt and pivot in an ever-changing learning and work environment (Archer, 2007). This adaptive plasticity allows those reflective students to be more resilient, to learn from their mistakes as they move through the minefield in front of them, staying positive in stressful situations to produce positive outcomes.

As Elise suggests, the ability of learners to adjust, measure and self-assess their performance, creates an employable learner who anticipates what is required in a work environment and can lead others to complete the challenging tasks foisted upon them. Alexa talks about transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) – a fundamental shift in perspective; by varying learning and experimenting with new approaches, students have a richer learning experience. Learners will think more creatively, imaginatively and resourcefully, and be ready to adapt to new ways and methods of thinking, achieving higher marks through critical thinking and empowering learners to develop a higher level of understanding.

Lastly, as Clare points out, this ability to be a reflective practitioner, undertaking continual learning, helps us to avoid stress, reduces the chance of compassion fatigue, informs our teaching practice and improves our mental health. As the benefits seem to far outweigh the time spent practising such an important technique, how can we afford not to be a reflective practitioner and encourage our learners to do the same?

In conclusion, moving forward, our Community of Practice research group recommends that tertiary educators should encourage the use of daily reflective practice in both our learners and educators; encourage documentation of reflective thoughts before, during and after action; critically examine our actions and experiences to learn from them, and finally interpret actions, experiences and learning to inform future decisions and create action plans to improve future performance for continuous improvement.

David Woodward is head of apiculture programmes and principal lecturer at central Otago campus, Otago Polytechnic, and an academic mentor and assessor at Capable NZ (MPP, DPP). With a background in botany and zoology, he was a research scientist, state advisor, head of apiculture, with 25 years' tertiary teaching experience.
ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5716-8865

Shannon Booth is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health, teaching on both the Bachelor of Applied Science and the Otago Secondary Tertiary College Police Pathways Programmes. Shannon has a background in secondary teaching and adult education, specialising in the areas of physical education, women's health, communication development and holistic wellbeing.
ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0272-5799

Elise Allen is a principal lecturer in Web Development, Software Engineering, User Experience Design and Professional Practice in the Bachelor of Information Technology programme at Otago Polytechnic. Her current areas of interest include experiential learning, 'Agile' practices, industry workflows in the classroom and studio-based learning for technology subjects.

⦿ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8208-0507

Alexa Forbes is a facilitator at Te Pūkenga College of Workbased learning (GDTE, GDSP, MPP, NZ Dip Te Reo (Rumaki) (Level 5)), and an elected member of the Otago Regional Council. Her specialist areas include futuring, sustainability and relational environmental thinking.

⦿ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2637-6925

Clare Morton is a senior lecturer with the School of Veterinary Nursing (RVN, GDTE, MPP) and works on the Level 6 diploma as a learning advisor and lead moderator. Her specialist area lies in reflective practice and how we can integrate this into our professional and personal lives.

⦿ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9600-5460

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