

work-based learning 5:

November 2023

Article

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6005001>

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PRACTICE ENHANCEMENT

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of
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INTRODUCTION

CapableNZ's Doctor of Professional Practice (D. ProfPrac) is a programme targeted towards workplace practitioners who wish to use their experience as catalysts for new knowledge creation. The D. ProfPrac has minimum timeframes to complete in three years, although many learners, including the first author, can take much longer than this to complete all of the necessary course requirements. Every D. ProfPrac candidate has a support team of two supervisors, including a lead and secondary academic mentor. Both supervisors are essential in providing feedback on coursework and being there as a sounding board for learners to share their ideas in a supportive forum. The D. ProfPrac programme includes two courses that must be completed as part of the assessment requirements. Course 1 focuses on articulating a practitioner's research and consists of two assessments: the Review of Learning and the Learning Agreement. A learner must successfully pass Course 1 before entering Course 2; Course 2 is focused on the practitioner research enquiry. The practitioner research enquiry is where the project unfurls itself, as every candidate must construct and lead their own project. Across both courses, the D. ProfPrac has a core method of utilising critical reflection for personal growth (Lester & Costley, 2010). At the end of every learner's journey, there needs to be tangible evidence for how the research project has led to improved workplace capabilities and how the newly gained learning has contributed towards improved practice. The purpose for writing this article is to share some of the learning I have gained over the course of my studies to date, specifically how consistently using the techniques of journaling and writing analytic memos can contribute to both learners and practitioners becoming more reflexive.

The following sections are the work of the first author, identifying as Carolyn Ellis's (2004) autoethnographic "I" as prefigured in her article, "Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity" (Ellis & Bochner, 2001). After the lead author's central writing, there follow reflective writings (also autoethnographic in methodological orientation) from the first author's mentors, so that this article is a multi-vocal, triangulatory subjective academic narrative, representing the shared knowledge repertoire of the community of practice of three: the learner and his two mentors.

BACKGROUND

From my writing desk the biggest fear I usually have is the dreaded blank page, but I am reminded of the old writing adage that you should write what you know with a goal of sharing personal insight. With this approach in mind, I have set out on this journey of writing this article to record my unanticipated learning and the surprise transformative moments that have appeared when I least expected them to; this transformative learning was in my opinion primarily a direct result of being more open to questioning my position. Transformative learning has been described by Mezirow (2009, p. 22) as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change." A key point to remember

is that transformative learning experiences do not appear out of thin air (Kuhn, 2021); transformative learning experiences, however, come out of hard work where a practitioner takes the time to analyse their assumptions and, in due course, consider their position (Mezirow, 1991). Reflection can be considered as a conduit for having transformative learning experiences, as through practising effective reflection, time and space can be created to make impactful changes to practice (Larrivee, 2000).

A key component for transformative learning experiences is practising ongoing reflection and making a habit of reflexive techniques. I have found Larrivee's (2000) exploration into reflection helpful and impactful on how I have approached the need to capture and reflect on my position during the course of my studies. For example, Larrivee (2000) mentions the need for critical practitioners to examine their personal and professional beliefs and consider their position's ethical consequences and impact on practice. Furthermore, Pavlovich (2007, p. 284) argues that effective reflection should be thought of as "as much a state of mind as it is a set of activities, with the end process being not so much resolution of an experience but rather better understanding of it." Extending these concepts further, a reflexive practitioner needs to become a more active inquirer in their domain. In this sense, it is helpful to consider what a practitioner can do to ensure that their reflection is impactful on learning.

REFLEXIVITY

Before exploring some of the specific practices I have used throughout my studies, it is helpful to first make a distinction between reflection and reflexivity. In my experience, both concepts are integral to being successful on the D. ProfPrac. Dewey (1916) defines reflection as trying to understand something from our experiences or a specific situation. Reflection is most concerned with examining what has happened and the person undertaking the reflection working through their thoughts about the experience (Bolton, 2010). Effective reflection involves a person considering what had happened and considering what could be done differently in the future with the intent of generating more positive outcomes (Bassot, 2016). If successful, the process may lead to new insights about what had happened or provide answers to where something had been missed (Bolton, 2010). Reflexivity, on the other hand, goes one step further than reflection, as practising reflexivity requires a person to step back and consider their position more thoroughly; in a practical sense, reflexivity requires a person to cast the mirror on themselves and dissect their prior judgments thoroughly (Pässilä et al., 2015). It is helpful to consider the differences between reflection and reflexivity in the learning process, as this will help to illuminate the most significant difference between the two concepts:

Whereas reflection encompasses learning by reflecting on the experience, a reflexive approach embraces learning in experience. Reflection is generally characterised as a cognitive activity; practical reflexivity as a dialogic and relational activity. Reflection involves giving order to situations; practical reflexivity means unsettling conventional practices. (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004, p. 2)

There are, of course, significant similarities between reflection and reflexivity, namely in encouraging critical thinking (Pässilä et al., 2015), but reflection without reflexivity does not necessarily require a practitioner to dissect their deeply held assumptions (Brookfield, 2017; Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004). Furthermore, reflexivity is commonly considered to be a process where a person considers how their position might have a bearing or impact on themselves and those around them (Berger, 2015). Taking the spotlight on oneself can be highly confronting, but it is still necessary to promote more impactful learning (Argyris, 1991). Such actions have been recognised as necessary for generating new knowledge within qualitative research projects (Ahmed et al., 2011).

Reflexive techniques can lead to a learner's research project having increased levels of trustworthiness (Finlay, 2008; Kingdon, 2005; Sullivan-Bolyai & Bova, 2021). This is because being reflexive requires learners to engage in continuous critical reflection throughout the research process and document their thought processes, actions,

and choices taken (Orange, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008). Reflexivity is a vital practice, in any qualitative research project, as a method to augment the critical appraisal of the researcher in their analysis, particularly around the dynamics between a researcher and participants (Sullivan-Bolyai & Bova, 2021). Effective reflexivity, though, requires ongoing critical self-reflection; specifically, how a researcher's social background, assumptions, positioning, and behaviour are all challenged during the research project (Finlay, 2008; McCabe & Holmes, 2009). Therefore, the learner and, in particular, acknowledging a learner's position, is implicit in safeguarding the integrity of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

JOURNALING

A key practice I recognised early in my D. ProfPrac journey was maintaining a reflexive journal. Braun and Clarke (2022) have argued that keeping a reflexive journal is one of the most important practices a learner can undertake throughout their research journey. Nowell et al. (2017, p. 3) have described a reflexive journal as “a self-critical account of the research process.” Although biases cannot ever be entirely removed from a qualitative project, Tamayo et al. (2020) remind learners that greater rigour can be injected into any qualitative project through ongoing journal entries. Becoming more deliberate about making ongoing reflections has been a key goal of mine. Nadin and Cassell (2006) have guided me in attaining this goal through their comments that reflexive journaling invites and encourages ongoing questioning about research practices and personal assumptions throughout any research project. One of the key benefits I have gained from the reflexive journaling process has been the opportunity for alternative interpretative possibilities. For example, through regular journaling, I have identified how my prior knowledge has impacted on the assumptions that I had about learning and the ways that I had previously interacted with some of my previous learners.

For additional ideas on how keeping a regular journal can assist in promoting greater reflexivity, Bassot's (2020) resource, *The Research Journal*, provides an excellent roadmap for learners just starting out on their journey. Bassot (2020) provides seven compelling reasons behind the importance of regular journaling, including:

- **It can help us to slow down** – Everyone needs enough time to develop their critical thinking, and through writing a journal, the process helps us to collect our thoughts and have a private space to be able to do this effectively.
- **It helps to externalise things** – Speaking from personal experience, you can spend an inordinate amount of thinking time on the D. ProfPrac; this extended thinking time can lead to feeling overwhelmed and confused. Writing a journal can assist with the ordering of thoughts and prioritising of tasks; such a process eventually leads to feelings of progression.
- **It is a place for offloading** – The D. ProfPrac has its ups and downs, and through writing a journal, a space can be created to document our thoughts when things do not go to plan. Such an approach can assist someone in dealing more effectively with stress created by studying on a programme with significant personal demands.
- **It helps us to keep on track** – A challenge that I have had on the D. ProfPrac is managing competing demands and ensuring that my time is spent being productive. I have found that keeping a journal is an excellent way to keep me grounded and focused on what is most important.
- **It provides us with a record that we can go back to** – At the start of my learning journey I believed that I had a better memory than I did, which meant that I tended to forget some key events; journaling has helped me to provide a tangible record of significant events and has ensured that I do not need to keep everything in my head.
- **It helps us to question our assumptions** – Regular journaling provides a safe space to address our biases and personal subjectivity that could be entering our projects.
- **It can make us more accountable** – Perhaps most importantly, I have found that regular journaling can make things more transparent and ensures that we keep our commitments towards timeframes.

Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that although there are no fixed rules for how to keep a reflexive journal, it should still be a space to push oneself rather than simply a space for description. In my journal, I have followed a reflexive approach by asking challenging questions about my thinking and position. Such an approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach of being brave enough to ask tough questions, such as why I had a specific

response or why an idea or theme might or might not be appropriate for inclusion. More importantly, Altrichter and Holly (2005) have argued that learners need to find their own style when writing their journals and to ensure that personal characteristics are included in any of the writing; if such an approach can be taken, this, in my experience, ensures far more meaningful writing can be produced.

ANALYTIC MEMOS

Besides keeping a journal, the other technique I have identified to enhance reflexivity is writing analytic memos (Kaczynski et al., 2014; Rubin, 2021; Saldaña, 2014). Analytic memos can be considered small write-ups or conversations with oneself and typically will document how a learner's understanding has evolved through the data collection stages (Satter, 2014). Saldaña (2014) mentions that an analytic memo is an example of a think piece of reflexive free writing, creating a space for a learner to clarify their interpretations of what is unfolding before their eyes. Analytic memos can also be used as summaries of significant findings (Satter, 2014); I have personally found the writing of analytic memos helpful for documenting the evolution of my research (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Analytic memos can also provide an essential piece of evidence regarding the role learners have in their professional practice research projects (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Additionally, a conversation I had with my supervisors during the writing of the analytic memos and, in particular, through using the memo function in the NVivo software programme, was that memos need to be considered cumulative and are meant to be personal in order to develop practice (Schram, 2003); analytic memos are also not meant to be polished pieces of writing, as they need to be considered as capturing an event in real-time, reflecting the development of thinking (Birks et al., 2008).

The writing of regular analytic memos enables learners to work with their project in unexpected ways, particularly engaging with the data to a depth that would otherwise be difficult to achieve (Birks et al., 2008). Additionally, broader literature shows that perhaps the most significant reason for writing analytic memos is that they can be a space for documenting the decision-making trail and recording the various research phases from conceptualisation through to the final write-up (Speziale & Carpenter, 2011). Analytic memos have helped me to document the progression of my study, and I consider their use a vital component of the audit trail that I am creating, particularly the change in direction I have noticed with my thinking. Regarding the mechanics of writing analytic memos, I identified that no single approach would be perfect. What was more important was what I was capturing rather than whether a memo was long or short (Rubin, 2021). For example, Rubin (2021) states that many impactful one-sentence memos can be created. Therefore, although one-sentence memos are not by themselves overly impressive, they still can be used towards developing insights. I also agree with Kaczynski et al.'s (2014) comment that when writing analytic memos what is most important is to write early and to write often. Writing early and often can be a challenge with life's demands, but I recognise the suggestion's value, and I have tried to find some space in my working week for uninterrupted writing.

Mentor I's contribution

As an experienced mentor in doctoral programmes, I contend that criticality remains the greatest challenge for professional practice postgraduate learners. I concur that key strategies and techniques for achieving critical reflexivity, such as reflexive journaling, analytic memoranda and mapping our intersectionalities (the place where different aspects of ourselves – our race, age, background, gender, ideological and political positions, and so on – come together) can and should be employed during professional practice learning trajectories.

A professional practice doctorate uses reflexive methods variously to apply and demonstrate key facets of the learning process in professional practice. The critically reflexive place is initially one for entertaining doubt around the questions, why me? Why this? Why now? Who am I to be conducting this enquiry? What are the drivers for this research, and whose interests does it need to serve? Why is now the right time to engage in such

a project? The critically reflexive space is the site of critically reflexive praxis: questioning, challenging, thinking and re-casting. The seeds of this work are sown throughout both courses on the D. ProfPrac.

More specifically, critical reflexivity is a space for learners to understand their authentic researcher voice within the discourse community of their practice.

Secondly, it is here where doctoral candidates establish and present a position from which to have a voice, and to situate their autoethnographic “I” into their practitioner spaces. They also interrogate (that is, continuously question from multiple perspectives) that position, imagining the range of alternate positions that might challenge them. Thirdly, reflexive methods serve to ensure rigour in the analysis and presentation of ‘data’, or whatever, as appropriate, stands in place of ‘data’ in the work of practice. Strategies for reflexivity enable us to see how our data are social constructions, and are presented and represented to a readership in a particular way with a particular purpose. To argue a rationale for each particular decision in the research process is to employ critical reflexivity.

Ultimately, applied reflexivity affords practitioners a more intimate understanding of their professional identities and the intersectionalities of facets of these identities, as they develop into the world of research (Coburn & Gomally, 2017). The first author of this paper, for instance, is ideally placed to understand the complex intersection of Chinese and Aotearoa New Zealand perspectives on pedagogy appropriate for transnational contexts due to his educational, personal and experiential life trajectories. He is simply the right person, in the right place, at the right time, and can furnish valid rationales for this claim. Such understandings promote agency, the power to make a difference, and enable practitioners to make transformative differences in their communities.

Mentor 2’s contribution

Reflexive practices examine one’s own feelings, reactions and motives to situations and acknowledge the role of the researcher in the research process. Qualitative researchers may also consider themselves an ‘insider’ researcher who shares attributes with the participants of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013); these are important components of the D. ProfPrac. Like a mutating COVID-19 virus, a teaching practitioner needs to constantly re-evaluate, reposition and adapt in order that their teaching philosophy or framework of teaching practice is current and meets the needs of learners. Jeremy aims to evaluate current teaching practice by undertaking semi-structured interviews with learners and educators while making unstructured observations of teaching practice. Chinese tertiary education is a fluid, ever changing dynamic of blended delivery models with constant barriers, such as COVID-19, and enablers, such as on-line teaching delivery, arising. Employment of journaling and analytic memos, while being both reflective and reflexive are important tools in developing a framework of pedagogical practice for Chinese transnational educators, that meet the needs of learners, in the future delivery of joint tertiary education programmes.

CONCLUSION

Although practising reflexivity is not easy, as it requires ongoing personal discipline and ring-fencing time, the rewards are significant, and its use is essential for any workplace learner. Reflexivity is a strategy in professional practice that elevates professional and experiential accounts into the realms of the critical and the transformative. Reflexivity is a necessity in so far as it is a means of achieving the rigour required of doctorate study. Two strategies that engage the learner in reflexivity, analytic memoranda and journaling, represent the kinds of ways of handling metacognition that enable candidates to demonstrate reflexive capacity and employ it to consolidate their professional practice. It should be remembered that learners who do not engage with reflexive practices put themselves in the unenviable position of what Freire (1970) calls living in a state of magical consciousness or

taking circumstances at face value. I am no Harry Potter, so I remind myself that it is best to keep things grounded through practising ongoing reflexivity. I am also hopeful that through completing my D. ProfPrac learning journey, I will continue to gain additional insights for developing my practice.

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