

## **Making Stuff Up**

### *student views of assessment in learning reflective practice*

Reflective practice, as both a learning method and a learning outcome, is promoted as having value to teachers and students in higher education. Reflective practice learning methods (such as reflective journals) can foster deep approaches to learning (Kember et al., 1996; Moon, 2003) by encouraging students to integrate theory and practice and to engage with different ways of representing knowledge (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011; Iwaoka & Crosetti, 2008). Reflective practice also encourages students to deeper understandings of themselves in relation to the world under study, thereby building engagement, confidence and self-awareness (Wright & Lundy, 2012).

Reflective practice is understood not only a way to support students to transform their understandings of self and subject. It is also a competency requirement for many professions, a tool for lifelong learning and, therefore, a necessary outcome of higher education. Accordingly, reflective learning and practice is commonly included in higher education drivers such as mission statements, graduate attributes and professional standards (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Ryan & Ryan, 2012).

However, teaching and learning reflective practice in higher education is not straightforward. Reflection is a complex, contested term (Moon, 2006) and teachers and students are often uncertain about what reflective practice actually is (Ryan & Ryan, 2012). Consequently, engaging in reflective practice education can be difficult for learners and teachers (Griggs, Holden, Rae, & Lawless, 2015; Johns & Henwood, 2009). I have found this to be so, experiencing difficult elements of reflective practice education (such as conflicting understandings of reflective practice) in my teaching practice in nutrition and dietetics.

Dietetics education globally emphasises reflective practice as a key skill and a professional competency requirement (Dietitians Association of Australia, 2009; New Zealand Dietitians Board, 2011; The British Dietetic Association, 2013). However, with some exceptions (for example, Brennan & Lennie, 2010; Nahikian-Nelms & Nelms, 1994; Wright & Lundy, 2012), there is little discipline specific guidance in the research literature about how to navigate the difficulties of teaching and learning reflective practice in dietetics education (Shafer & Knous, 2001).

I recently undertook a study that aimed to further address this gap in the field. The study's specific methodological drive was to gain understandings about how people teach and learn reflective practice in the first year of a two-year postgraduate dietetics training programme. To this end, the study used a range of quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, including surveys, interviews, concept maps, and document analysis. All data collection tools were used to collect data from all groups of study participants (students (n=23), and teachers (n=7)). The study employed aspects of emergent design and was primarily qualitative. I was positioned as a participant observer, adopting an ethnographic, interpretivist approach.

The preliminary study findings that this paper outlines are concerned with student experiences of assessment. Assessment emerged clearly from the study data as central to student participants' experiences of reflective practice learning. Interestingly, assessment practices did not feature highly in teachers' reported experiences of

reflective practice learning and teaching. This discrepancy between teacher and student views of assessment in itself signalled that assessment in reflective practice education warranted further attention.

The study found that assessment in reflective practice teaching and learning was complex, in that it both fostered and hampered the development of reflective practice skills. On one hand, and to some extent, students found assessment practices beneficial to their learning. Some students reported that they tried harder and put in better work if a reflective practice activity was assessed. This finding echoes that of other studies (for example, Dymont & O'Connell, 2011; Kember et al., 1996) that assessment supports learning by adding legitimacy to reflective activities and encouraging students to persevere.

Conversely, assessment hampers the development of students' reflective practice skills by encouraging students to resist reflection. A number of writers note that, if reflection is assessed, students can be reluctant to reveal their authentic responses (Mitchell, 1994; Thomas & Snadden, 1998). As one of my student participants said,

*you want me to be reflective, to write about how I'm feeling and my emotions... but I don't want that to be marked. If you really want to get into the nitty gritty of it, for me to get how I'm feeling on paper... Like there's no way I'm going to fully open up and get that out there if I know it's going to be marked. Or if there's going to be some sort of value placed on it ... cos that's mine and you're saying that that's bad or good is kind of, for me at least... it's a little bit weird.*

A fear of being judged, and consequent resistance, was reported by a high proportion of student participants. In some instances, even when students were initially motivated by assessment requirements to authentically reflect, their subsequent disappointment over poor grades served to shut them down and resist further authentic reflection.

In addition to direct resistance, some students resisted covertly, performing reflection to meet marking criteria. For example, another student participant explained that,

*I find I have to fudge some of my actual learning and make stuff up in order to try and match what the marking schedule dictates... therefore losing much of the value and purpose of doing so.*

This phenomena of 'fudging learning', of 'making stuff up' can be likened to what Hobbs (2007) calls 'faking it' and Challis (2001) describes as students playing the 'assessment game', producing evidence to please assessors rather than using reflective assessment activities as learning tools. McFarlane and Gourlay (2009) also use the game analogy in relation to reflection as an assessment practice tool. In a critique of the use of reflective assignments as assessments in higher education, they argue for a reconsideration of using reflective practice as an assessment tool.

A case for not assessing reflective practice is supported by this study's findings. The findings imply that some of the problematic elements of assessment in reflective practice education are rooted in power relationships and hierarchy and suggest that it is imperative to find other ways than traditional forms of summative assessment to encourage students to develop their reflective practice skills. This would likely

involve a reconceptualisation of notions of assessment and a reconsideration of the divides that exist between those designated as teachers and those designated as learners and how these divides (in this case, as exemplified by assessment) impede learning and teaching.

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