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**Reflective writing: I wouldn't start from here .... (0158)**

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Reflection and reflective practice have become widely associated with professional development in education (Schön, 1987; Day 1993; Forde et al, 2006). Although concerns have been expressed about the ways in which these may be implemented, through instrumental, prescriptive routines and an individualistic focus (Boud and Walker, 1998; Kilminster et al, 2010). The role of writing, as a narrative storying of practice, has become established as a means of engaging in reflection (Bleakley, 2000; Bolton, 2005).

Consequently there is a long tradition of reflective writing across a variety of fields, such as nursing, social work, teaching, counselling (Holly, 1989; Moon, 1999; Bolton, 2005). However despite such wide usage it cannot be assumed that this is underpinned by shared understandings. The literature offers differing views of the nature of reflection and its role in professional development (Jay and Johnson, 2002; Tummons, 2007), which is acknowledged as leading to some uncertainty amongst students regarding what they are required to do (Bolton, 2001; Moon, 2004; Mair, 2012). Similarly there are different approaches to reflective writing, ranging from individual journals and collaborative blogs to structured frames and closely directed tasks (Holly, 1989; Hughes, 2005; Mair, 2012). Furthermore the metaphor itself has been questioned (Bolton, 2001) and alternatives suggested, such as refraction (Anson et al, 2003), diffraction (Barad, 2007).

Bolton (2005:46) describes writing as a 'first order activity' that provides a means of creating understandings, of clarifying thought, rather than just being a way of recording them. Her view of reflective writing aligns with Richardson and St Pierre's (2000) conceptualisation of writing as a 'method of inquiry', a means of exploration and discovery, of deliberation and analysis. Holly (1989) and Bleakley (2000) suggest that writing offers new ways of conceptualising experience and a means of accessing tacit knowledge. Although Bleakley (2000) cautions that if writing is a vehicle for reflective practice, then the form of writing employed will define the nature of the resultant reflection.

The growth of reflection for professional development has led to the need for evidence of its use and effectiveness. Hence professionals in many sectors are required to keep some form of written record of their reflection, such as a log, journal or portfolio, often in electronic form (Kilminster et al, 2010). However, concerns have

been raised that reflective writing maybe used to evidence and assess an assumed underlying skill of reflection (Sen, 2010) rather than as a means of reflection in its own right (Charon and Hermann, 2012).

This paper will explore the use of writing workshops to support and develop the use of reflective writing amongst HE in FE practitioners.

## **Method**

We designed a series of six writing workshops themed around reflective, parallel chart, observation and collaborative writing, to explore opportunities for writing as a means of professional development. The participants were a group of staff teaching on HE programmes within an FE College, who volunteered for the workshops.

Two focus groups and individual interviews were also conducted with the participants to explore their experience of the writing workshops and to sharing our interpretations with them as a means of invoking further responses following St.Pierre (1997).

## **Findings.**

As the participants had volunteered for the workshops and we anticipated that they would readily engage with the forms of writing offered. However our assumptions were challenged when they initially didn't write.

Although they didn't write in response to the reflective writing workshops, there was a strong reflective element to the writing they subsequently produced and their emergent thoughts on reflective writing were evident in the interviews and focus group discussions.

Conceptualising reflective writing.

The participants' responses explored how they saw reflective writing, as well as how they used it personally and with students.

Some felt writing had an important role in *facilitating* reflection, in accordance with the views expressed by Richardson and Bolton, while others claimed they wrote little, questioning the value of writing.

*I sort of think of it more as a way of thinking in writing (Tony FG1)*

There was evidence too that the participants were questioning their own understandings of the role of writing, articulating new understandings through the discussion with others.

There was also evidence of a reaction against the imposition of having to write, which the participants had experienced through studying for their teaching qualification and in their teaching role. This led them to question the value of the reflective writing they had experienced, as Paul suggests:

*I mean I think as soon as it's imposed and I think it ceases to be meaningful  
(Paul FG1)*

It also led them to question their own use of reflective writing in their teaching, particularly the ways in which reflective writing was constructed when students' writing is used to evidence their reflections. Thus the tensions between the two approaches to reflective writing outlined by Charon and Hermann (2012) are apparent, as Mary suggests:

*something that I was concerned about was the way I get students to write reflectively and how we make them reference it and make it look more academic than it needs to be perhaps (Mary - int)*

Bleakley (2000) suggests that if writing is a vehicle for reflective practice, then the form of writing employed will define the nature of the resultant reflection, so there is a risk that the writing activities prescribed will limit reflection to instrumental and technical-rational outcomes (Kilminster et al, 2010).

It also became evident that participating in the writing workshops was not just encouraging them to question their practice, but leading them to make changes. Also evident was that the workshops had opened up possibilities for a wider interpretation of reflective writing:

*I think partly it's the label, isn't it? It's trying to divide it up, I mean, every single bit of writing I do is reflective. (Karen int)*

So despite an initial reluctance to engage with reflective writing, the participants did grasp this opportunity. Writing provided a method of inquiry for them to examine their practice and their own understandings of reflection, to open up new possibilities for practice.

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