STUDENTS’ REFLECTIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES THROUGH THE USE OF INTRANET WORDPRESS BLOG

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Introduction

Reflections are activities applied by individuals to explore their experiences intellectually and affectively for better comprehension and appreciation (Boud et al., 1985). Maran and Rose (2002) highlighted that reflections are used to redefine our understanding of knowledge, to be aware of actions taken, to enhance actions quality and to evaluate whether actions done are appropriate. Ismail (2009) interpreted reflective practice as activities that involve thinking about actions and the consequences thoroughly. Schon (1983) classified reflective practice into two types which are Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action. Schon (1987) viewed Reflection-In-Action as ‘thinking on your own feet’ that requires the use of one’s schemata or tacit knowledge and experiences. In Reflection-In-Action, the problems are solved immediately or “on the spot” (Schon, 1983; Schon, 1987). On the other hand, Schon (1987) stated that Reflection-On-Action usually occurs when we reflect after making the actions.

However, impacts and results from the act of reflections alone will not last long if these reflections are not recorded or documented. As stated by Bolton (2001), reflecting through talking solely might cause the gist of the reflections to be untraceable without any record. She added that this is because the written details will be recorded, stored, reread and shared with others. Bolton (2001) emphasised that writing activities can act as a ‘vehicle for reflection’.

Hatton and Smith (1995) highlighted that reflective writing can be categorised into four types of writing which are ‘Descriptive’ writing, ‘Descriptive Reflection’, ‘Critical Reflection’ and ‘Dialogic Reflection’. Boyd et al. (2006) mentioned that the occurrences of these four types of writing can be seen through journal or diary writing.

Statement of Problems

Schon (1983) highlighted that the concept of ‘reflective practitioner’ plays a significant role in education. However, emphasising on the act of reflections alone might not be enough. If nothing is done to systematically record or document the reflective event, good probable solutions found on the problem will just be lost in the near future. As stated by Bolton (2001),
reflections that depend on talking solely might cause the gist of the reflections to be untraceable and vanished into thin air as there is no written record to be found.

Boyd et al. (2006) stated that it is vital for students to make use of reflective writing to record their reflections. They added that this is because reflective writing enables the students to find meanings in the information. Bolton (2001) stressed that writing leaves footsteps which encourage deeper thoughts towards something. Thus, this study is concerned on investigating students’ reflective writing activities which involve documenting and recording of their reflections.

According to Iwaoka and Crosetti (2008), journals are used to record the students’ reflections in developing their skills in creative and critical thinking, communication and decision making. Unfortunately, the act of reflections via the traditional writing like journals and diaries are limited to personal access (Papacharissi, 2007). Most solutions or ideas mentioned in private journals could not be shared with others (Papacharissi, 2007). Hence, this research intends to explore the availability of other electronic media that could be utilised to record the reflections while at the same time giving others the opportunity to participate in the reflections. While previous studies done on reflections and reflective writing were more focused on traditional approach of writing using journals and diaries, this study however focused on exploring the reflections done by the students using a blog environment.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the students’ reflective writing activities using the Intranet WordPress blog.

**Research Questions**

Responding to the problems that were introduced, this research study addressed the following research questions:

1. Did students reflect-on-action more than they reflected-in-action?
2. What reflective writing approaches did students apply when they recorded their reflections?

**Significance of the Study**

This study has important implications for educational practices as well as research in reflective practice and reflective writing. Firstly, the students will benefit from the study in terms of ideas or information that could be shared from their peers’ reflections. The nature of writing in blogs enables the students to express their reflections and opinions in an unthreatening environment. Their reflections usually involve true and authentic feelings, ideas, opinions and expressions towards their learning experiences. As for educators, vital information deriving from
the students’ feelings, ideas, opinions and expressions can be capitalised for future and better instructional strategies. Another significant factor derived from the study is that blogs can be considered as a potential tool that can be used to facilitate students’ learning activities. In addition, the capabilities of blogs that can record posts and comments will enable the students’ reflective writing to be threaded, recorded and analysed for better teaching and learning strategies.

**Literature Review**

**Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice depends highly on further processing and understanding towards the knowledge and emotions (Moon, 2000). Ismail (2009) stated that this process of active thinking is initiated when a learner stumbles upon problem solving situations and experimentations. In his study, it was found that students mentioned about the challenges and issues faced during the problem-based learning activities in their reflections. Schon (1987) categorised reflective practice into Reflection-On-Action and Reflection-In-Action.

**Reflection-In-Action**

Schon (1987) defined Reflection-In-Action as the ability of professionals to ‘think what they are doing while they are doing it’. Cited from Hatton and Smith (1995), Schon (1983) viewed Reflection-In-Action as the most complex and demanding type of reflection as it requires multiple perspectives to be applied during the thinking process.

Schon (1983) emphasised that experienced people are most likely to practise Reflection-In-Action compared to the novices. This is because the tacit knowledge or schemata and experiences possessed by the experienced people enable them to provide solutions to the problems encountered instantaneously (Schon, 1983). On the other hand, the novices who are lack of schemata and experiences are unable to provide the solutions promptly.

**Reflection-On-Action**

Reflection-On-Action takes place after one completes the actions. To be more specific, Schon (1983,) highlighted that Reflection-On-Action occurs after a problem is encountered. Schon (1987) stated that Reflection-On-Action involves one responding to a problem with extended or delayed time frames. According to Hatton and Smith (1995), during the extended period for reflections, one is able to find many alternatives for actions. Schon (1983) stated that within this extended time, one goes to many resources for solutions before one manages to come up with probable delayed solutions. The reflective process based on Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action is displayed in Figure 1:
Figure 1: Reflective Process Based on Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action

However, depending on reflections and reflective practice alone might not be sufficient. This is because reflections that depend on talking solely might cause the gist of the reflections to be untraceable as there is no written record to be found (Bolton, 2001). People have made use of traditional journal and diary writing to express their feelings and record their reflections. However, traditional journal writing is normally locked to one course while blogs can be seen as a “perpetual learning journals” that could enhance students’ personal and professional development (Quinn, Duff, Johnston & Gursansky, 2007). Ramos (2004) stated that reflective journal writing offers educators a reflective view into students’ mind; hence the use of blogs as a medium to engage students in writing reflections would be ideal.
According to Atkins and Murphy (1995), reflective learning skills can be promoted when one writes diaries or journals. To date, people have made use of journals and diaries to record their reflective writing. Papacharissi (2007) stated that the contents of journals and diaries are rather personal and cannot be shared with others. She added that blogs, on the other hand, are open for many people to browse, read and participate. Blogs enable messages, information, ideas and reflections to be shared with the online community (Chretien, Goldman & Feselis, 2008; Grassley & Bartoletti, 2009).

**Reflective Writing**

Hatton and Smith (1995) described four types of reflective writing involved in students’ reflections. The four types of reflective writing are “Descriptive” writing, “Descriptive Reflection”, “Dialogic Reflection” and “Critical Reflection” (Hatton & Smith, 1995). According to Hatton and Smith (1995), “Descriptive” writing is employed to describe a sequence of events and the setting of events for further discussions. “Descriptive” writing is considered as not reflective at all since it has no attempt to provide reasons or justifications for events. However, if one goes deeper in writing reflections, one will immerse into “Descriptive Reflection”.

In “Descriptive Reflection”, one attempts to provide reasons or justification based on personal judgement. In providing judgments, one tends to include their feelings, motivation, attitudes and beliefs. These dispositions reflected the affective domains of learning (Boyd et al., 2006).

In “Dialogic Reflection”, one hears his or her own voice (alone with others) in exploring alternative ways to solve problems in a learning situation and possible reasons of experiences, events and actions. During the exploration, one mulls about events or actions (Hatton and Smith, 1995). Hatton and Smith (1995) added that conversations that were “personal, tentative, exploratory, and at time indecisive” were considered “dialogic” (p.42). Mezirow (2000) used the term “reflective discourse” to refer to the use of dialogue for searching a common understanding and assessment of a justification by considering supporting evidence, arguments and assumptions. Mezirow (2000) added that reflective discourse involves critical assessment of assumptions.

When one goes into a more in-depth level of reflection, one immerses into “Critical Reflection”. In “Critical Reflection”, one demonstrates that reasoning out of actions and events are also influenced by external contexts such as historical, social, political and business. Apart from that, “Critical Reflection” blends learning through experience with theoretical and technical learning to form new knowledge constructions (Stein, 2000). “Critical Reflection” also combines the cognitive processes and affective dispositions (Bandman & Bandman, 1995). The cognitive skills involve interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self regulation (Facione, 1990). The types of reflective writing and levels of reflections can be synthesised in Figure 2:
Methodology

Research Design

This is a preliminary study leading to a Master thesis. This study made use of a qualitative research design. The data for this study was gathered and collected; however, only some parts of the data were analysed for this paper. The data were analysed using the constant comparative analysis method.

Sample

The samples of this research study were 50 undergraduates of Applied Language Studies: English for Professional Communication from UiTM Shah Alam. Three hundred reflections gathered from the 50 randomly selected students were analysed for this study.
Instrumentation

Since this study investigated students’ reflective writing activities through the use of Intranet blog, a WordPress blog application and the constant comparative analysis method were used as the instruments. WordPress is a weblog application that supports the authoring, editing, and publishing of blog posts and comments. The students were given the privileges to access and to write on the blogs. To analyse the reflections, the constant comparative analysis method was employed. Constant comparative method involves comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and properties, delimiting theory and writing the theory (Glaser and Strauss as cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

A Wordpress blog was set up to enable the students to write their reflections in the blog. The students were briefed on the concepts of Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action at the beginning of the semester. The students were asked to write 200-250 words of reflections based on a given topic on a weekly basis for ten weeks. During the data collection period, the students were guided with several posts on topic of the week from the post master. After ten weeks, 300 reflections were collected and analysed. The data were analysed using the constant comparative analysis method.

Results

Demographic Information

Table 1 shows the total number of reflections gathered for the study which was 300. Only students who submitted between five to ten reflections were considered to participate in the study. Forty students submitted 223 (74%) reflections which consisted of five and six reflections. Only one student submitted all ten reflections.

Table 1
Total Number of Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Reflections</th>
<th>Total Number of Students</th>
<th>Total Number of Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>85 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>138 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>300 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1: Did students reflect-on-action more than they reflected-in-action?

Schon’s (1983) types of reflections, which are Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action, were used in analysing the data. From the total of 300 reflections analysed, only 85 occurrences are recorded. The occurrences of Reflection-In-Action are 10 (12%) while the occurrences of Reflection-On-Action are 75 (88%). Table 2 displays the number of occurrences and percentages of Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action:

Table 2
Number of Occurrences of Two Types of Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection-In-Action</th>
<th>Reflection-On-Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occurrences</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following excerpts show the occurrences of Reflection-In-Action using one’s own schemata with prompt solutions provided:

- Student 4A_F_1

Problem Encountered

Tacit Knowledge/Schemata

Prompt Solution Provided

Problem Encountered

Well, this is not my first time learning about creating my own webpage because practically I have already learned about creating my own webpage during my matriculation years before. However, I guess that this time around it will be a bit more detail. So, after Dr. O finished his meeting, he taught us on how to use Dreamweaver. . .

I managed to put a picture, and typed out “WELCOME” to my page. . .

I have followed the instructions quite well though there were some problems during the process. . .

-Student 3A_F_3
Below are some of the examples of Reflection-On-Action that show delayed responses:

“...For the past one hour, we just look [sic] at the appropriate topics for our academic writing...After struggling for few hours, we managed to come out with a topic which is Enhancing Student Reading Performance via MIP in Technology Environment...”

- Student 4B_F_1

“...For MIP VI, my group members and I faced a scripting problem at the end of our production [in Adobe Director]... After we get [sic] some fresh air, cleared our mind and get [sic] ready for the 'correction' job, we started over. After a very hard and tiring work, we managed to do the correction...”

- Student 4D_F_7

From the analysis, it is found that students went to many resources to help them solve the problems encountered. The resources consisted of human resources such as lecturers and peers, and academic materials such as books and online search. Below are some of the examples of Reflection-On-Action that show references from many resources:

“...However, without explanations from Dr.O, all of us can’t [sic] do it but we still tried to do it... He came and explained how to do it. And then I realized it was so easy. Then we did it again and managed to do it [in Adobe Photoshop].”

- Student 3B_F_1

“...Working with this Adobe Director really test[sic] my patience... it takes[sic] hours to make one thing to move to another. I have[sic] to ask every single thing to my group members how i was going to get it done...”

- Student 3A_F_6

“...Dr O didn’t want any 0.25525 numbers. So we figured that out by searching the internet on how to get a rounded number in director. The problem was solved by putting the script on the “MY SCORE” cast as the float precision = 0 [in Adobe Director]...”

- Student 4D_F_10

**Research Question 2:** What reflective writing approaches did students apply when they recorded their reflections?

The four types of reflective writing described by Hatton and Smith (1995), Bandman and Bandman (1990), Mezirow (1990, 1998), Stein (2000), Boyd et al (2006), Hegarty (2011) were used in analysing the data. The four types of reflective writing are “Descriptive” writing, “Descriptive Reflection”, “Critical Reflection” and “Dialogic Reflection”. It is found that
“Descriptive Reflection” has the highest occurrences with 383 (48%). This is followed by “Descriptive” writing with the occurrences of 371 (46.3%). “Dialogic Reflection” recorded only 26 (3.2%) occurrences; while “Critical Reflection” reported only 20 (2.5%) occurrences. Table 3 and Figure 3 display the number of occurrences and percentages of types of reflective writing:

Table 3

Number of Occurrences of Types of Reflective Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Reflective Writing</th>
<th>Number of Occurrences</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive writing</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Reflection</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic Reflection</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reflection</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Number of Occurrences of Types of Reflective Writing

Based on the data analysed, students immersed into “Descriptive Reflection” when they provided their judgment towards feelings and events.

Judgment towards Event

Judgment towards Feeling

" . . . It sound [sic] and look [sic] interesting but creating it was a disaster for me. Honestly, until now I have fail[sic] to actually create the sequence...and I felt quite frustrated because. . . “

-Student 4A_M_3
Judgment towards Feeling

{ "...My relationship with Adobe Director is way off track due to I hate the software with all my guts. However, after Dr O taught us on, ...These new adjustments have created an interest in me and have changed my perception towards Adobe Director...”

-Student 4B_M_1

Apart from that, “Descriptive Reflection” was also involved when students provided reasons or justification of their actions.

“...These three levels have to be done because we need to ensure that the students can be tested according to their level of knowledge. By doing this, the students who use our MIP version 2 could know how their progress and their performance since each level provides questions that are suitable for the students understanding...”

-Student 4D_F_9

Based on the analysis, it is found students used “Descriptive” writing when they described the events in sequence that occurred without being reflective. These are some of the excerpts on “Descriptive” writing:

“...There were few problems. First, it was [sic] the internet connection which was very slow and hard for me to get. Then, I had to go to e-library which required username and password which I did not know of. The last problem was that...”

-Student 4D_F_2

From the analysis, it is found that some students engaged in conversations within themselves to find reasons of events and to explore possible solutions to a problem. These are some of the excerpts on “Dialogic Reflection”.

“...In [sic] the beginning of the lesson I faced some difficulties in understanding the instructions provided in the CD [in Adobe Director]. Maybe I’m not reading and understanding the instructions thoroughly and that’s why I’m facing these difficulties...”

-Student 3A_F_8

“...Initially it started out really bad, as time went by, we managed to solve the 3 marks problem. In my opinion, the reason that we were incapable of solving another ‘problem’ was because we did not comprehend how the lingo works...”

-Student 4C_M_1
Based on the findings, students used “Critical Reflection” in their reflections to find solutions to problems.

“. . . The reason for that problem was because the player which was Adobe Shockwave Player was not installed in the computer; so the banner that we uploaded turned out to be blank rectangle in our site. Therefore, we need to make sure that the .swf that we put in our index page has the Flash icon because most of the computers have players that support this type of file. . .”

-Student 3A_M_1

The following excerpts show “Critical Reflection” giving reasons for decisions of events which takes into account the broader historical, social and/or political contexts:

“. . . We have to be aware that as university students, we have been honoured to have the chance to carry the name our honorary university’s name on our shoulder, thus, we should be proud and stay out from committing academic dishonesty. . .”

-Student 4B_M_1

Discussions and Conclusion

Out of 300 reflections, 75 (88%) occurrences were categorised as Reflection-On-Action while only 10 (12%) occurrences were categorised as ‘Reflection-In-Action’. This implies that students did not have the vast body of knowledge that enables them to reflect instantaneously. Students tend to refer to many resources such as subject matter experts, lecturers and their friends to find solutions for problems rather than solving the problems using their own knowledge or experiences. These findings are congruent to what were reported by Schon (1983) and Ismail (2001).

The highest occurrences for types of reflective writing were Descriptive Reflection” with 383 (48%). Students who immersed in “Descriptive Reflection” usually included their personal judgements and expressed their feelings and ideas when they described their new experiences. They also provided reasons and justifications of their actions. Their reflections were written in the form of receiving and responding to their learning experiences. All these findings supported the claims made by Hatton & Smith (1995), Boyd et. al (2006) and Hegarty (2011).

The occurrences of “Descriptive” writing are 366 (46.3%). This type of reflective writing allows the students to set the stage for further discussions. Some of the students used “Descriptive” writing to describe their experiences as if they were telling a story without putting much thought into their reflections.
A small number of occurrences of the “Dialogic Reflection”, which is 26 (3.2%), implies that students were not trained to explore possible reasons of events. Some of the students did not try to explore alternative solutions to resolve problems encountered. Even if some of them did converse within themselves and with others to discuss or explore a problem, they did not follow through with finding solutions.

Only 20 (2.5%) occurrences are recorded from the students’ reflections as “Critical Reflection”. This could be due to the fact that most of the students did not put enough effort to look for and provide probable solutions to resolve or deal with their new experiences. Furthermore, the involvement of this type of writing demanded one to interpret, analyse, evaluate, explain and make inferences in their reflections (Bandman & Bandman, 1995). The critical thinking strategies were still not applied by most of the students in their reflections.

This highlights that students should be encouraged to analyse their learning experiences critically to ensure more meaningful reflection could be documented for future references. The students also should be trained and exposed on how write their reflections effectively so that they would be able to evaluate issues encountered, seek probable solutions and propose some action plans to resolve the problems encountered. These findings supported Bolton (2001)’s view on the importance of reflections to be documented. Reflections that depend on talking solely might cause the gist of reflections to be untraceable and vanish into thin air (Bolton, 2001).

Reflective practice has become an important learning activity in the world of education. It acts as a platform for the educators as well as learners to evaluate their actions and level of understanding. With the emergence of technology in classrooms, blogs can be considered as a potential tool for the educators to capture these meaningful reflections derived from the students’ learning experiences for better instructional learning strategies. Proper contents on reflective writing activities should be embedded in the curriculum so that the impact would be more prominent.
REFERENCES


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