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

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Abstract

Reflection involves the evaluation of feelings, ideas and opinions of past and current experiences for future references. Reflection redefines our understanding of knowledge, enhances the quality of actions taken and evaluates whether such actions are appropriate (Boud, Keogh, Walker, 1985). Reflection, either reflected-on-action or reflected-in-action (Schon, 1987), are documented through the use of Reflective Writing (Boyd, Dooley, Felton, 2006). This study examined students’ reflective writing activities via an Intranet WordPress blog. A random sampling method was used to select 58 English for Professional Communication undergraduates. Two research questions were examined: (1) Did students reflect-on-action more than they reflected-in-action? (2) What types of reflective writing were applied by the students in their reflections? Data from 451 reflections were analysed using a constant comparative analysis. The findings reported that the students’ reflections were mostly Reflection-On-Action (88%) as compared to Reflection-In-Action (12%). The findings also recorded the occurrences of different types of reflective writing. The students applied various types of reflective writing that included their feelings, opinions, perceptions and learning experiences. All these new experiences of web-based reflective writing using blogs can lead to important implications for effective instruction and learning strategies.

Keywords: Reflection, Reflective Writing, Blog

1 INTRODUCTION

Reflection is viewed as an important learning activity in professional education (Boud, Keogh, Walker, 1985). Reflection is an activity applied by individuals to explore their experiences intellectually and affectively for better comprehension and appreciation (Boud, Dooley & Felton, 1985). Maran and Rose (2002) highlighted few purposes of reflection which are to redefine one’s understanding of professional 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 an activity that involves thinking about an action and the consequences thoroughly. Schon (1983) classified two types of reflection involved in the reflective practice which are Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action. Schon (1987) defined Reflection-In-Action as a process that enables one to redefine things that one is working on at the same time it occurs. For Reflection-On-Action, Schon (1987) stated that it
usually occurs when one reflects on one’s completed actions and the preceding actions that lead to the outcome. However, impacts and results from the act of reflection alone will not last long if the reflection is not recorded or documented.

Documenting one’s reflection through reflective writing could be one way to sustain the authenticity of one’s experiences (Boyd et al., 2006). Besides that, reflecting through talking solely might cause the gist of the reflection to be untraceable without any record (Bolton, 2001). According to Bolton (2001), writing leaves footsteps that facilitate rapid thinking towards something. She added that this is because the written details will be recorded, stored, re-read and shared with others. Bolton (2001) emphasised that writing provides a platform for us to know more about ourselves in which she highlighted this writing activity as a ‘vehicle for reflection’. She added that the process of writing encourages and leads us to reflect. Hatton and Smith (1995) stated that reflective writing can be categorised into four types of reflective writing which are “Descriptive writing”, “Descriptive Reflection”, “Dialogic Reflection” and “Critical Reflection”. Boyd et al. (2006) mentioned that occurrences of these four types of reflective writing could be seen through journal or diary writing. Reflective writing through journals enables one to recall an event at later time through the description written in the reflections (Atkins & Murphy, 1995). However, 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).

1.1 Problem Statement

The act of reflection is not new. The notion of reflection was mentioned as early as in Aristotle’s time when he discussed the role of reflection in shaping moral action (Wilson, 2009). Dewey (1933) extended Aristotle’s view by bringing the concept of reflection in experiential learning context. Schon (1983) emphasised that ‘reflective practitioners’ play a significant role in education. However, emphasising on the act of reflection 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), reflection that depends on talking solely might cause the gist of the reflection to be untraceable and vanish into thin air as there is no written record to be found. Furthermore, Bolton (2001) stressed that through writing, information will be recorded, stored, reread and shared with others. Journals are used to record the students’ reflections in developing their skills in creative and critical thinking, communication and decision making (Iwaoka and Crosetti, 2008). Unfortunately, the act of reflection via the traditional writing like journals and diaries is 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 explored the use of an electronic media, a WordPress blog, to record the students’ reflections in which the blog provided the students with the opportunity to share their reflections with their peers. While previous studies done on reflection and reflective writing were more focused on traditional approach of writing using journals and diaries, this study however looked at a different approach by exploring the reflections done by the students using a blog environment. In addition, Williams (2004) stated that blogs have high potential to be used as ‘learning spaces’ within the higher education sector.
1.2 Purpose of the Study

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

1.3 Research Questions

In response to the problems introduced, this research study addressed the research questions as follow:

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

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study has important implications for educational practices as well as research in reflective practice and reflective writing. The students will benefit from the study in terms of the documented problem solutions in their reflections. Students will be able to share the solutions to the problems encountered with their peers. The nature of writing in blogs enables the students to express their reflections and opinions in an unthreatening environment. Their reflections 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 finding derived from the study is that blogs can be considered as a potential tool that can be used to facilitate students’ learning performances. 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.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reflection and Reflective Practice

Moon (1999) defined reflection as “a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution” (p.23). As mentioned by Dewey (1933), the act of reflection involves responding to a problem in a holistic way. From the notion of reflection, Schon (1983) introduced the concept of reflective practice. In reflective practice, one thoughtfully considers one’s experiences in applying knowledge for practice (Schon, 1996). As stated by Daudelin (1996), reflective thinking which takes place in reflective practice, involves practice of thinking about materials, problems, situations, experiences and their meaning to self.
Schon (1987) categorised reflective practice into two types of reflection that deal with Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action. Schon (1987) viewed Reflection-In-Action as the ability of professionals to ‘think what they are doing while they are doing it’. This type of reflection usually occurs when a problem is encountered. Schon (1983, 1987) added that Reflection-In-Action is about delving into a problem that one has encountered in a new way. However, even among professionals, if an unusual, an unexpected or a complex situation takes place, and the existing knowledge can no longer provide reflection upon a situation, they may also resort to Reflection-On-Action. Reflection-On-Action takes place when one reflects on a completed action or on a preceding action that leads to an outcome (Schon, 1983). To be more specific, Schon (1983, 1987) highlighted that Reflection-On-Action occurs after a problem is encountered. The reflection that takes place after a prolonged period enables one to investigate other potential alternatives (Hatton & Smith, 1995). As stated by Ismail (2001), within the extended time and delayed time of a problem-solving process, one resorts or refers to many resources for solutions. There are many resources involved in the problem-solving process (Brand-Gruwel, Wopereis & Vermetten, 2005) which include assistance from individuals such as facilitators (Reeve, 2006), peers (O’Donnel & King, 1999) experts, emails, online discussion groups and referral services in finding solutions to a problem (Eisenberg & Doug, 1996). For academic materials, students could refer to electronic reference materials such as electronic encyclopaedias, dictionaries, fact books (Eisenberg & Doug, 1996), online journals, electronic books, webpages and CD-ROMs (Nisonger, 2007). The act of reflection could be documented through reflective writing activities so that it could be referred in the future.

1.3 Reflective Writing

Reflective writing is a process of writing that involves reflection of an experience or event (Michaud, 2010). 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 and Smith (1995) discussed that “Descriptive writing” is employed to describe a setting of an event for further discussions. “Descriptive writing” is also used to report an event (Boyd et al., 2006). “Descriptive writing” is considered as not reflective at all since it has no attempt to provide reasons or justifications for events (Hatton & Smith, 1995). However, if one goes deeper in writing reflections, one will employ “Descriptive Reflection”. In “Descriptive Reflection”, one attempts to provide reasons or justification of events or actions based on one’s personal towards events, feelings, thoughts, motivation, attitudes and beliefs judgements (Boyd et al., 2006).

In “Dialogic Reflection”, one is involved with conversations within oneself or with others. In “Dialogic Reflection”, one hears one’s own voice (alone with another) when exploring possible reasons of events or experiences and explores alternative ways to solve problems encountered during events or experiences. During the exploration, one steps back from the events or experiences leading to a different level of mulling about. If one explores further into the most in-depth level of reflection, one will use “Critical Reflection”. In this type of reflective writing, one connects one’s experiences with one’s surroundings. Hence, one tends to include the social, political, and historical views in one’s reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995). “Critical Reflection” blends learning through experience and theoretical and technical learning to form new knowledge (Stein, 2000). In “Critical Reflection”, affective
dispositions such as feelings, motivation, attitudes, beliefs (Boyd et al., 2006) and cognitive skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference (Facione, 1990) are combined (Bandman & Bandman, 1995).

Reflective skills could be promoted through diary and journal writing (Atkins & Murphy (1995), in which one provides ideas, thoughts, reflections and feelings on paper in various learning contexts (Gilmore, 1996). However, traditional journal writing is normally locked to one course while blogs can be seen as a “perpetual learning journal” that can enhance students’ personal and professional development (Quinn, Duff, Johnston & Gursansky, 2007). Hence, blogs can be used to capture the students’ reflections and provide them with an environment for collaborative learning.

2.4 Blogs

Blog is an online journal or diary which encourages interaction within an online community (Grassley & Bartoletti, 2009). Price (2010) said that blogs are usually used to disseminate information and share experiences or ideas with others. Quoted from BBC News (2005), Muratore (2008) added that blogs have a significant role in stimulating participants to give their opinions. In the educational setting, Grassley and Bartoletti (2009) said that the feature of blogs such as ‘commenting’ enables students to engage in peer-to-peer interactions where students may respond to the posted reflections and comments with their own ideas and views.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study used qualitative analysis. A constant comparative analysis method was used to analyse the types of reflection (Schon, 1983, 1987) and the types of reflective writing (Hatton & Smith, 1995) involved in the students’ reflections. This study made use of one of the techniques of the content analysis which was a constant comparative analysis method as presented by Wellington (2000). From the students’ reflections, the data were analysed in terms of the occurrences of Schon’s (1983, 1987) types of reflection and Hatton and Smith’s (1995) types of reflective writing.

3.2 Samples

The study involved 58 undergraduates of Applied Language Studies: English for Professional Communication who followed the Development and Production of e-Language Materials classes (EPC 682). Their 451 reflections were analysed, tabulated and reported.

3.3 Instruments

A WordPress blog application, a constant comparative analysis and a WordSmith application were used as the instruments for this study. A WordPress blog is a weblog application that supports authoring, editing and publishing of blog posts and comments.
These features enable the students to post their personal reflections and comments on their friends’ reflections. The WordPress blog was set up in the UiTM intranet environment which enabled only the students who participated in the study to post their reflections and comments on ten different topics from week 1 to week 10. Besides that, a WordSmith application was also used as one of the instruments in the study. The WordSmith application is a corpus linguistic tool that identifies patterns in a language. For this study, the WordSmith application was used to identify reflective words that belong to affective and cognitive domains.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

A Wordpress blog was set up for the purpose of collecting the data required for the qualitative analysis. The blog was set up in an Intranet environment to ensure that only students who participated in the study could have access to the blog. The students were also provided with their personal ‘Login ID’ and password, giving them the privileges to post and comment on the blog. Before the students started to post and comment on the blog, the students were briefed on the concept of reflective practice to ensure that the students were exposed to the two types of reflection before they started writing their reflections. The students were invited to write 200 to 250 words per reflection for ten weeks on their blog. During the process of writing the reflections, the students were also encouraged to interact with their peers in threaded discussions. During the data collection period, the students were provided with several posts. Each post involved a different topic for a different week. A WordPress blog database was maintained throughout the data collection period. Through this database, the researcher was able to access and collect the reflections posted from week 1 to week 10.

3.5 Data Analysis

The first stage of the constant comparative analysis (Wellington, 2000) involved dividing the students’ reflections into units of meaning. The students’ reflections were categorised based on a different topic assigned for each week. These topics were closely related to the weekly lessons. The reflections were then categorised based on Schon’s types of reflection and Hatton and Smith’s (1995) types of reflective writing. The two types of reflection are Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action; while, the four types of reflective writing are “Descriptive writing”, “Descriptive Reflection”, “Dialogic Reflection” and “Critical Reflection”. After the categories were identified, each category was further defined with more specific characteristics. In the case of Schon’s types of reflection, one of the critical characteristics was whether students were able to solve the problems encountered immediately, or whether they delayed the problem solving process to some other time. As for the types of reflective writing, the characteristics were refined based on the review made by Hatton and Smith (1995), Facione, (1990), Bandman and Bandman (1995), Mezirow (1991, 1998), Stein (2000), Boyd and et al. (2006) and Hegarty (2011).
4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Information

A total of 58 undergraduate students of Applied Language Studies: English for Professional Communication from UiTM Shah Alam Malaysia participated in the study entitled “Students’ Reflective Writing Activities through the Use of Intranet WordPress Blog”. All students were asked to write their reflections for ten weeks on a voluntary basis. Table 1 shows the total number of reflections (451) submitted by the 58 randomly selected students based on the total number of reflections submitted and their gender differences.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Reflections</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total Number of Students</th>
<th>Total Number of Reflections</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Research Question 1: To identify whether students’ reflections involved more Reflection-On-Action or Reflection-In-Action

Based on the analysis of the reflections, it is found that students reflected-on-action more than they reflected-in-action when they wrote their reflections. From the total of 451 reflections analysed, 108 occurrences of the two types of reflection are found. The occurrences of Reflection-In-Action were 14 (12%) while the occurrences of Reflection-On-Action were 94 (88%). The result of the occurrences of Reflection-In-Action and Reflection-On-Action is displayed in Table 2.
Table 2

**Number of Occurrences of Two Types of Reflection in the Students’ Reflections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection-In-Action</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Reflection-On-Action</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>94</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following excerpt shows the occurrence of Reflection-In-Action when students used their own tacit knowledge or schemata in solving the problems encountered:

Problem Encountered

Tacit Knowledge/Schemata

But then, I always try to implement the technique that one of my lecturers in pre-Tesl had taught me before on how to search in appropriate way that is we must type the relevant topic with a quotation mark . . .

-Student 4A_F_1

The following excerpt highlights the delayed responses and solutions provided in Reflection-On-Action:

Problem Encountered

Delayed Responses

So Dr. O gave us some time during the mass lecture. It was quite a tough one i must say. We tried to search the internet by using keywords . . . Unfortunately, we found nothing.

Delayed Solution Provided

Dr. O came and helped us by telling the keywords that we need to use such as “Lingo”, “Scripting” and such. Fortunately, we found it!

-Student 4C_M_3

### 4.3 Research Question 2:

To find out the reflective writing approaches that students applied when they recorded their reflections

Based on the analysis of the 451 reflections, it is found that students’ reflections involved the four types of reflective writing as described by Hatton and Smith (1995). In some reflections, there are also occurrences of more than one type of reflective writing. It is found that “Descriptive Reflection” has the largest proportion of occurrences with 563 (45%).
This is followed by “Descriptive writing” with the occurrences of 537 (43%), “Dialogic Reflection” with 129 (10%) occurrences and “Critical Reflection” with 25 (2%) occurrences. Table 3 shows the results of the occurrences of the types of reflective writing in the students’ reflections:

Table 3

Occurrences of Types of Reflective Writing in the Students’ Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Reflective Writing</th>
<th>Number of Occurrences</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive (DE)</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Reflection (DR)</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic Reflection (DiaR)</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reflection (CR)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>1254</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Descriptive writing”

The following excerpt shows how students started their reflections with “Descriptive writing”:

“This week, we have already gone through half of our study for this semester. We have another half way to go for this semester. Another 6 weeks and MIP has to be submitted. Well, actually our group does not [sic] start anything yet for MIP version 2…”

-Student 4B_M_3

Besides that, students used “Descriptive writing” when they described the events that occurred in sequence as depicted in the following excerpt:

“. . .There are two levels in getting the mark, first: we need to find the scripting for Transfer and Tracking Result, second: We need to find the scripting for the pie chart and bar chart that represent the result in [Adobe Director]…”

-Student 4A_F_6

“Descriptive Reflection”

Based on the data analysed, students used “Descriptive Reflection” when they included their judgments towards events and feelings, and expressions of thoughts as displayed in the following excerpts:

Judgment towards Event

“. . . 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 feel quite frustrated because Dr Othman promises to give us 10 bonus marks if we are able to do the right scripting. I have actually tried it several times but still it has resulted to more frustration. . .”
Judgment towards Feeling

“...MIP production is one tiring job. There is so much to do. Although there are five of us, there are still tons of tasks that need to be done. But one thing, I must confess that I am starting to enjoy doing MIP.”

-Student 4A_M_3

Judgment towards Event

“...Yes, it is difficult but when I look back, the time that we spend [sic] doing all of the tasks is precious...”

-Student 4A_F_8

“Dialogic Reflection”

These are some of the excerpts that show students used “Dialogic Reflection” when they explored the reasons of events:

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

-Student 3A_F_8

In addition, the following excerpts show that students used “Dialogic Reflection” when they explored alternative solutions for the problems encountered:

“...The problem is, I cannot [sic] use the keygen to generate the serial number. I don’t know[sic] if it is not compatible with my laptop or maybe it is because of the software itself [in Adobe Director]...”

-Student 4D_F_2

The following excerpts show how students used “Critical Reflection” when they provided problem solutions in their reflections:

“...In future time, I have to make sure that I save my work every single time I make any changes[in Adobe Dreamweaver]. Before we can upload it to the server, we have to make sure that we are connected to it. Once we are connected to Dr. O’s server, we can upload what we had done....”

-Student 3A_M_1

In addition, students also used “Critical Reflection” when they applied any theories learnt in completing their assignments and projects as depicted in the following excerpts:

“...Lastly, we have concluded that by integrating all the multimedia applications in MIP version 2, it addresses different learning styles and provides an interactive learning environment for learners. This enables them to become actively engaged in the learning process....”

-Student 4A_F_3

Based on the analysis, students used “Critical Reflection” when they related the event that took place to their surroundings. The following excerpts depicted how students gave their opinions towards the issue of plagiarism using “Critical Reflection”: 
“...Yes, I know that the assignments are tough but it is our responsibility to fulfil the tasks. ...We have to be aware that as university students, we have been honoured to have the chance to carry the name [of] our honorary university’s name on our shoulder, thus, we should be proud and stay out from committing academic dishonesty...”

-Student 4B_M_1

5 DISCUSSIONS

Ninety-four (88%) occurrences involved Reflection-On-Action while only 14 (12%) occurrences involved ‘Reflection-In-Action’. This implies that students did not have the vast body of knowledge that enables them to reflect instantaneously (Schon, 1983). 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 (Ismail, 2001). There were 563 (45%) occurrences of “Descriptive Reflection” in the students’ reflections. Students who immersed into “Descriptive Reflection” usually included their personal judgements (Hatton and Smith, 1995) and expressed their feelings and ideas (Hegarty, 2011) when they described their new experiences. They also provided reasons and justifications of their actions. The employment of this type of writing shows that students ‘received’ and ‘responded’ to the situation and experience in their reflections (Boyd et al., 2006). The occurrences of “Descriptive” writing are 537 (43%). “Descriptive” writing was involved in the reflections because this type of reflective writing enables the students to set the stage for further discussions (Hatton & Smith, 1995). 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. The small number of occurrences of the “Dialogic Reflection” which is 129 (10%) implies that students were not trained to explore possible reasons of events. They also did not try to explore alternatives and solutions to resolve problems encountered. Students were more comfortable to accept the situations as they were rather than finding the reasons and solutions for the problems. Only 25 (2%) occurrences were recorded from the students’ reflections as “Critical Reflection”. This could be due to the fact that 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).

6 CONCLUSION

These findings indicate that students reflected more on-action than they reflected in-action most of the time. The findings also highlight that there are four types of reflective writing that are usually involved in students’ reflections which are “Descriptive”, “Descriptive Reflection”, “Dialogic Reflection” and “Critical Reflection”. Most students tend to employ the “Descriptive Reflection” as compared to the other type of reflective writing. 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 towards certain matters. 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.

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