Practice Papers

Reflective journal assessment: The application of good feedback practice to facilitating self-directed learning

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The purpose of the reflective journal assessment in higher education is to develop students' critical reflection on the learning experience and self-directed learning skills. Yet, this poses challenges in terms of designing and implementing effective assessment practice for the successful outcomes of reflective journal writing. Using one postgraduate tourism course offered at the University of South Australia as a case study, this paper explores the main problems and challenging issues, focusing on the application of good feedback practice to reflective journal assessment. There was evidence that the use of clear assessment criteria on reflective practice and mixed on-going feedback strategies was essential for facilitating students' self-directed learning skills at the early stage of their reflective journal writing process. This research addresses further insights into the structuring and use of feedback strategies through reflective journal. © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Reflective journal assessment has been considered as an alternative innovative tool to enhance the goals of student-directed learning through encouraging students to reflect critically on the process of learning experience and deeper engagement with a subject topic (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Epstein, 1999; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009; SchÖn, 1983). Given the nature of student-directed learning, this reflective journal approach focuses on 'what learners do' and 'why they think they are doing it', rather than 'what the teacher asks to do' which represents a teacher-directed approach (Biggs, 1999). It is noted that reflective journal allows students to ask questions, reflect their own learning process, and make a connection between their theoretical understanding and personal experience in practice (Woodward, 1998).

There is much discussion in the literature in relation to the concept of reflection and its principles (Dewey, 1933; Pavlovich, 2007; SchÖn, 1983), with empirical research on the effects of reflection on student learning. However, little has been written about assessment strategies to facilitate a self-directed reflective practice from an educator's perspective (Chirema, 2007). In particular, the design and development of assessment strategies for maximising the benefits of reflective journal is a challenging task because of the unfamiliar use of the personal voice and regular writing process (Woodward, 1998; Zahra, 2009). As the core goal of reflective journal focuses on students' active responsibility for their own learning process, further effective assessment feedback strategies are required to facilitate students' active engagement with monitoring their learning tasks and assessing their progress towards the desired learning goals (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Yet, the importance of using feedback strategies in support of self-directed learning have not been fully explored in the reflective journal assessment literature. This paper, thus, presents the challenging issues in

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developing assessment criteria and feedback strategies around reflective journal which have been modified in one of the postgraduate tourism courses offered at the University of South Australia over the 4 years.

2. Context

The reflective journal assessment has been designed and implemented in a postgraduate course, titled the "Tourism Impacts and Sustainability" in the Masters of Management programme at the University of South Australia, Australia. The aim of the course is to challenge students' awareness and understanding regarding various debates on the positive or negative impacts of tourism in terms of economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects. In addition, the students are also expected to evaluate key strategies for minimising negative impacts of tourism and for achieving sustainability. This course attracts mostly Chinese students who have little to medium knowledge of tourism subjects, consisting of approximately 40–50 students per year (i.e. from 2008 to 2011).

3. The design of the reflective journal

Students were required to regularly write a short reflection on the lecture topic of each week over 10 weeks (approximately 250 words per week), linking to various class activities, reading materials and personal experiences. The purpose of reflective journal is to enhance students' critical thinking and writing skills, especially targeting the international students who are not confident in expressing and writing their own opinions. Additionally, it was designed to provide learners with a more flexible choice in the content and process of reflection on the learning experiences. As suggested by Ciero (2006), students were encouraged to ask questions on various debates, admit confusion, and make connections between concepts and relevant examples. This enabled students to challenge themselves with their own values, new ideas and insights through evaluating their current viewpoints and experiences on the true side of tourism impacts which they are somewhat familiar with or they might overlook upon. In this way, students can monitor themselves how their learning could be progressed and their understanding could be developed to a deeper level of learning. Formative feedback on their initial journal drafts was also organised for students to clarify the requirements of this type of assessment and re-evaluate their approach to reflective journal writing within the first 3–4 weeks of time.

4. Developing feedback strategies for the reflective journal assessment practice

Previous studies have advocated that feedback has perhaps the greatest influence on how students monitor their engagement with learning activities and assess on-going progress and performance (Boud, 1986; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Ramsden, 2003). Indeed, one of the main principles of good assessment practice highlights the importance of providing useful and timely feedback on student learning progress (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In the assessment practice, summative feedback has been commonly utilised in reflective journal writing. However, Hughes (2011) addresses the important role of formative feedback as part of facilitating "assessment *for* learning" which helps learners move towards self-directed learning, rather than being sensitive with summative grades. Taking up this point, a much more rigorous approach to the development of formative feedback strategies was utilised and restructured in order to identify and improve performance quality by both the teacher and students. This study identified the key challenging issues which include: defining the learning goals and assessment criteria, the performance processes, and self-assessment by the learner (e.g. questioning about where they need to go next), as suggested by Hattie and Timperley (2007).

5. Formative feedback: student understanding of assessment criteria

One of the major challenging issues was the need of developing clear guidelines and assessment criteria for the successful outcome of reflective journal. Its guidelines were consistently modified at the early stage of the formative feedback design process as several problems have occurred due to a lack of clarity in terms of what is expected and what is being assessed in this assessment. Supporting some similar problems identified in the literature (e.g. Fleming & Martin, 2007; Plack et al., 2007; Zahra, 2009), for example, this study found that many international students with English as a second language, and more specifically Chinese students were more frustrated with its unclear requirements and the value of the reflective journal as they often perceive reflective journal as busy work or an unfamiliar assessment tool. Some of them misunderstood the term, 'reflective journal' by summarising one particular academic journal article or describing their own personal travel experiences. Others made superficial comments and conclusive remarks on the key issues, without providing further specific evidence and critical arguments on the issue. As suggested by the previous literature (Fleming & Martin, 2007), students were allowed to use specific questions that could prompt more discussion and reflection on one single issue. However, this study revealed that this approach could lead to a shallow learning approach as some students were overly used to ask various questions without further elaborating their own reflection on this thought. For example: