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Engaging with “Webness” in Online Reflective Writing Practices

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Abstract

This article argues that online reflective practices in higher education produce tensions around ownership, control, and safety. Reflective writing pedagogies, commonly grounded in a humanist philosophical tradition, often value coherence and authenticity. Writing online, however, opens students and teachers to the sorts of questions and uncertainties about subjectivity, ownership of data, privacy, and disclosure that characterize the online context. This is the case no matter how much teachers try to protect students or deny the “webness” of their reflective practices. The article draws on qualitative data from interviews with students and teachers in higher education in the United Kingdom. It argues that engaging with digital traces calls for a different approach to reflection, and proposes the “placeholder” as a way to privilege fragments, speed, and remixability in a reflective writing context.
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Keywords: Online reflective writing; Database; Subjectivity; Remix; Placeholder; Control; Ownership; Blog; E-portfolio; Humanism

This article draws on data from interviews with students and teachers in professional higher education programs in the United Kingdom to show how a humanist foundation of reflective writing is problematized by online reflection and to explore how an alternative philosophical position might lead to more generative digital reflective writing practices. Students and teachers spoke with me in detail about how it was to write reflectively online and to engage with this writing; how they thought about online reflection in terms of audience, ownership, disclosure and privacy; and what sorts of identities emerge in reflective writing, and data from these interviews is discussed here.

Humanist assumptions about individual purposefulness, unity, authenticity, coherence of identity, and how these qualities can be articulated are dominant in pedagogies of reflection (Fenwick, 2000) and have already been identified and critiqued in the context of reflective writing. For example, Lynn Fendler’s (2003) analysis of the various meanings of reflection ultimately tied reflective practices to Foucauldian neo-liberal governmentality, where governing power was decentred and located within individuals, who became responsible for their own surveillance (Lemke, 2001). Tony Gilbert (2001) maintained that it is disingenuous to speak of autonomous, pure, critical selves emerging from practices which demanded confession and discipline experience. Macfarlane and Gourlay (2009) invoked a “‘hidden curriculum’ of emotional performativity” in reflective writing (p. 455) which required students to humbly admit to their weaknesses, demonstrate that they had changed, and refrain from questioning current theoretically fashionable positions. For these reasons, Fendler (2003) categorized reflective journal writing as a site of “surveillance and an exercise of pastoral power” (p. 22). Discourses of reflection depend to a great extent on notions of individualism and

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emancipatory liberal humanism (Bleakley, 1999). Despite the fact that these notions have been deeply problematized in the "poststructuralist turn" in the social sciences in particular (Davies & Davies, 2007), Sue Clegg (2004) argued that teachers in higher education are invited to accept them as "obvious and transparent" (p. 293) when it comes to reflection.

This paper builds on these critiques and argues further that the effects of what I am calling "webness," the specific qualities of meaning-making and text-making in digital environments, create additional complexities for the construction, maintenance, and disclosure of a reflective self in online writing. When humanist assumptions underpin online reflective writing, implicitly or explicitly, students and teachers can find themselves in challenging and sometimes paradoxical positions. This article explores how these positions can play out and calls for a philosophy of reflective writing that can better take account of digital contexts and practices. This philosophy draws from work being done in articulating what digital reflective writing might afford, and is rooted in theories of online and database subjectivity. One way it might be put into practice is through what I am calling "placeholder" reflection—bringing together speed, fragmentation and remixability (by which I mean the ability to recombine and recontextualize content to create new meanings or creative works) to offer students a more flexible and more digital way of constructing accounts of competence, learning, and experience.

1. Reflective writing in professional disciplines

The specific context of this article is higher education in the United Kingdom, where online reflective writing is increasingly part of the landscape across a range of disciplines, but particularly in professional and vocational programs of study (Strivens & Ward, 2010). Often reflective practices are incorporated as "high-stakes" or assessed elements of programs in order to comply with the requirements of accrediting bodies for evidence of the development of "reflective practitioners." Perhaps as a result of this professional focus, writing as a practice is not often foregrounded, and reflective writing in particular is seen as a transparent and stable mode of self-disclosure, rather than as a complex genre requiring sophisticated literacy practices. It is also typically the case that, before moving into online reflective environments such as blogs or e-portfolios, these programs used paper-based reflection in the form of diaries, logs, and portfolios. Perhaps for this reason, researchers and educators in profession-based disciplines generally seem to assume that online reflective writing is basically equivalent to its offline counterpart. Online reflective accounts are usually assumed to have a straightforward relationship with the offline selves of students. Where digital difference is acknowledged in online reflective practices, it is seen to be technological rather than conceptual, and beneficial rather than problematic (Butler, 2006, p. 12). This paper positions the digital more radically, as a space in which the humanist assumptions underpinning reflective writing practices can sometimes be seen to become insufficient or break down.

In their analysis of the rhetorical strategies of professional development, Edwards and Katherine (2006) argued that models, theories, and so-called common-sense understandings of reflection often ignore the "intertextual and interdiscursive practices that make it possible" (p. 123). They object to the notion of reflection as a mirror, instead proposing to view it as a "language game" that privileges the idea of language as transparent (Edwards & Katherine, 2006). However, the implications of this way of thinking about reflective writing—as producing the history and the reality it represents—are, as Taylor (2003) argued, rarely acknowledged (p. 249). To do so would be to undermine the foundations of reflective practice because the use of reflective writing is justified in professional higher education disciplines on the grounds that it supports students to develop themselves through authentically and coherently representing their experience. There is an often tacit assumption about the kind of self doing the reflecting: it is individual, autonomous, consistent, but most of all amenable to development and progression through effort and direction.

This assumption underpins much of the most influential work on reflection, from John Dewey onwards. Dewey (1933) considered reflective thinking to be different from other kinds of mental processes, relying on logic, evidence, discipline, and purposefulness. Through reflection, a state of doubt resolves into a settled truth or course of action (p. 12). Rogers Russell (2001) analyzed seven theories of reflection (including Dewey; Donald Schön; and David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, & David Walker) and found some commonality in terms of definitions: he maintained that there was broad agreement that reflection was a cognitive activity or process which required the individual's active engagement to examine his or her own emotional or cognitive responses to situations or experiences (p. 41). Jenny Moon (1999) identified slightly different theoretical sources of reflective practices (primarily Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, with important contributions from Schön and David Kolb) and maintained that reflection

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