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Perceptions of Doctoral Graduates on the Usefulness of Written Reflections as an Instructional Strategy

Esther Swink

Introduction

One of the goals of the Ed.D. in Leadership and Professional Practice at Trevecca Nazarene University is for candidates to be reflective practitioners. Since the inception of the program in 1999, written reflections as an instructional strategy has been encouraged by the administration and used by several professors. This focus is supported by the conceptual framework that informs all courses and programs in the School of Education and includes the national standards adopted by INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) which calls for teacher education candidates to be reflective practitioners who plan, implement, and evaluate effectively. This standard is applied to all programs, including those at the master's and doctoral levels. Research by Ballantyne and Packer (1995) in *Studies in Continuing Education* reported that the analysis of journal entries by 13 students enrolled in education doctoral programs confirmed the usefulness of journals in reflecting on and connecting academic learning and experience.

The purposes of this study at Trevecca were both general and specific in nature. Generally, the study was part of an on-going evaluation of the doctoral program with a goal of continuous improvement. Specifically, the study gathered feedback to evaluate the usefulness of a specific instructional strategy, written reflections, that is employed frequently within the program.

The Problem

Research (Ashby, 2006); Loo, 2002; and Stephenson and Haylett, 2000) suggests that individuals who reflect in writing on their successes and failures, both professionally and personally, tend to improve their effectiveness. Often, professional practitioners do not evaluate their work accomplishments effectively. As this skill does not

come naturally for most people, students must be encouraged to develop this strategy through practice. Given that assignments requiring significant reflection and writing are frequent requirements of the doctoral candidates, it seemed wise to determine the perceptions of doctoral graduates about the usefulness of reflective writing to their professional practice as a means to evaluate the use of reflections as an instructional strategy in the program.

Related Literature

The review of literature for this article includes discussions of the use of reflections in a variety of settings or applications. These include pre-service education, university courses, a K-12 school, nursing, counseling, business, technology, government, and therapy.

Stein, Isaacs, and Andrews (2004) studied current approaches used by one university teacher to increase authentic learning experiences for students. The teacher's goal was to bridge the gap between the learning within formal institutions and learning within real-life communities. The instructor used a variety of data sources including a diary of written reflections related to his teaching, specifically regarding how he attempted to capitalize on the formal structures in a university to support students as they developed their understandings about what it is like to practice in a business management community.

Increasingly, students are required to prepare and submit electronic portfolios that include written reflections. Bullock and Hawk (2001) developed a booklet to provide guidance to pre-service teachers giving examples of types of reflections that are acceptable for inclusion in portfolios and included recommendations in four areas: audience, clear writing, voice and bias.

To test the levels of reflective judgment of students, researchers from Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) conducted a study, based on work from the Purdue EPICS program's Reflective Judgment Model, with 68 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the Interprofessional Projects Program (IPRO). The types of projects varied and included service learning, process improvement, research and business planning experiences. Considered to be the most advanced type of reasoning to be used when there is uncertainty in problem solving, reflective thinking permits individuals to evaluate all possible solutions and choose the best solution while recognizing that other solutions are possible. The researchers in this study differentiated between critical thinking, reflections, and reflective thinking. Noting that critical thinking involves problem solving, logic, and inquiry, the authors suggested that the critical thinking process may lack assumptions about knowledge and does not require awareness of uncertainty about problems or solutions.

Reflections were viewed as helping students to develop critical and reflective thinking skills by analyzing process, experience, and results and to increase ability to learn. The distinctiveness of reflective thinking in this study was in its application to business planning, design, and process improvement and an emphasis on greater complexity and the awareness of lack of certainty. This study examined the level of reflective thinking of students in the IPRO program through questions related to four learning objectives: project management, teamwork, communications, and ethics. The questions were categorized into four stages of reflective judgment: (1) pre-reflective thinking, (2) thinking heavily influenced by opinion, (3) thinking based on a given perspective with beliefs justified within the context of that perspective, and (4) recognition that knowledge is uncertain resulting in comparison and evaluation within the uncertainty of the evidence and context. Results indicated that students were not engaged in high levels of reflective thinking. The majority (65%) were at pre-reflective stages, 34% fell into the mid-range quasi-reflective stages, and only one response of the 295 was identified as being truly reflective. The researchers determined to increase reflective judgment among students by implementing proper training and more probing questions.

Reflective journaling has become an instructional strategy in clinical training for nursing students. To respond to a need to capture critical thinking of students across the curriculum and to evaluate students' ability to communicate effectively, Ruthman et al. (2004), with a team of faculty from the Nursing and English Departments at Bradley University, collaborated to develop guidelines for clinical journaling to be used in the baccalaureate nursing education program. Faculty described clinical journaling "as a subjective and objective written expression of cognitive learning experiences, attitudes, and feelings that provides an avenue to promote optimal student learning (1). It links prior knowledge, skill acquisition, decision making, critical thinking, observation, description, empathy, and/or release of feeling" (p.1). Students were required to complete a journal log for each clinical day, and faculty evaluated the logs based on the quality of content that related to specific objectives. Also at the end of each clinical rotation, the students completed a final summary in three areas: (1) Conducted a self-assessment of performance measured against learning objectives and identified strengths, weaknesses, and future progress needed; (2) Identified obstacles to learning; and (3) Described experiences with patients that facilitated learning.

Faculty evaluated the summary related to course objectives and to the effectiveness of the communication, including focus, organization, mechanics, and style. Judgments related to the usefulness of the journaling included: (1) Provided a consistent framework for student learning and evaluation; (2) Gave evidence of a pattern of accomplishments and challenges; (3) Reflected identifiable progression and established evaluation standards; (4) Demonstrated a cumulative integration of skills; (5) Allowed students to set goals and reflect on experiences; (6) Integrated knowledge of theory and practice; (7) Strengthened communication and organization skills; (8) Developed students' awareness of strengths, challenges, attitudes and feelings. Both students and faculty identified positive outcomes of reflective journaling. Challenges identified related to time required, balancing the logs with other required assignments, and grading practices including consistency of evaluation.

Nurse Practitioner, Carmel Ashby (2006), recommended written reflection as a model to look in detail at different aspects of nursing experiences. She theorized that a reflective model provides a structure to aid critical analyses. She defined reflection as “active, purposeful thought applied to an experience to understand the meaning of that experience for the individual”(p.1). The purpose of reflection is “to gain understanding, which leads to changes in what we do, and new perspectives” (p.1), requiring critical appraisal of experiences and resulting in understanding that adds to knowledge. Providing an example of journaling about her work with a problematic asthma patient, Ashby used the Gibbs’ model for reflection (which consists of description of the situation, exploration of feelings, evaluation of experience, reflection to make sense of the experience, considering options, making conclusions, and taking action) to view the incident from different perspectives instead of focusing only on her personal reaction to it. She posited that using a reflective model resulted in empowerment and transformative behavior.

Using journaling as an intervention with patients receiving twelve-step facilitation therapy in a residential setting, Stephenson and Haylett (2000) reported having twelve clients complete diaries written in the third person to evaluate weekly progress. These clients had been in treatment for four weeks prior to the intervention. Analyses of the entries in the diaries showed no change in focus, temporal orientation or referent, but did show a marked increase in positivity which was verified by a computer analysis of positive feeling words. The researchers concluded that clients who responded positively to the intervention tended to do well in recovery.

In recent years, popular literature has lauded the usefulness of journal writing. In an article in the *IDEA Fitness Journal*, Kate Larsen (April 2006), certified business and life coach, referenced the journals of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Anne Frank, and Henry David Thoreau as examples of writings that have inspired, challenged and encouraged readers. She identified benefits of journaling, including improving thinking and decision-making skills, and offered guidelines for journaling. DeLima (2005), a consultant in career and workplace strategies, in *Computing Canada*, suggested journaling as a tool to move

towards greater self awareness and meaning in one’s career, the goal being to move unconscious thought into the conscious mind resulting in the emergence and identification of patterns over time. In a special section on leadership in the *PA Times*, Jenne Rodriquez, (2000) Director of Community and Rural Development in Nebraska, discussing leadership in state government, identified an *intelligent leader* as a person who takes time for self-reflection, self-disclosure, and sharing the vision with others.

Focusing “on the usefulness of reflective learning journals as a method of promoting both individual and team performance in the context of project management training and team-building” (p.1), Loo (2002) posited that journaling promotes critical self-awareness and is a useful tool for learning as an individual and as a member of a team. The researcher extracted seven major themes from the journals: interpersonal relationships, communication within the team, the stress/pressure of time, team vs. individual work, lessons learned and action for improvement, personal criticisms, and evaluation of the journaling process. The learning journals showed that many students had reflected on the assignments and identified lessons they had learned as well as actions they should take to improve effectiveness. The participants’ responses to evaluation statements about journaling indicated that the majority believe that they gained greater insight about their learning and that they think they will reflect more about future learning experiences; however, the majority did not think they would be likely to use a learning journal.

In an urban high school, Tillman (2003) conducted a case study of a mentoring triad—a first year African American teacher who was experiencing a number of instructional and classroom management problems and was at risk of leaving the profession, her mentor, and her principal. The participants used reflection and reciprocal journaling to reflect on and dialogue about the challenges of teaching in a large urban high school. Tillman examined dialogic journaling as a reciprocal process of communication among the participants for the purpose of reflecting about instructional practices, the principal’s expectations, racial and cultural issues, the teacher’s decision about remaining in the position, and of evaluating the mentoring process. The written dialogue from the principal included the assessment

of the teacher's progress, suggestions about her instructional practices, and ideas for socialization to a new profession and a new school. The teacher's reflections indicated that her difficulty in maintaining discipline was directly linked to her low expectations of student performance and her beliefs that students did not value education. She expressed frustrations and feelings of inadequacy as a teacher and her lack of involvement in the school community and expressed that the mentor's ideas had not improved her classroom experience.

Initially, the teacher viewed the journaling process as a survival approach, and the principal considered it as a first step in addressing the teacher's challenges. All believed the teacher would not return for a second year. However, near the end of the study, the teacher expressed having experienced some success with student learning, that the dialogue with the principal had made her feel a part of the community, and that she believed the principal was committed to her success. Although she valued the mentor, she gave greater value to the leadership of the principal. Tillman concluded that reflection and journaling in this study were effective in uncovering frustrations and expectations of the first-year teacher and the principal.

Risko, Vukelich and Roskos (2002) conducted a critical review of empirical research that focused directly on reflection with pre-service teachers and conducted a study in their literacy methods courses to learn what students did when asked to reflect on course assignments. In summary, they found that the professional literature did not adequately provide guidance to students about how to reflect. Second, many researchers did not describe how the students were expected to focus during the reflection process. Their general conclusion quoted an assessment by Zeichner and Liston (1991) that "as long as teachers reflect about something, in some manner, whatever they decide to do is acceptable since they reflected on it" (p.2). Third, they found the reflections by pre-service teachers were often "shallow and egocentric." Following this analysis, they decided to analyze the intention of researchers' work, review the contradictions that appear in the body of work, and identify possibilities for use with pre-service teachers. In so doing, they posited that reflection should focus on problem solving, cognitive activity (deliberative reasoning), and sociopolitical action (socialization

into the culture of teaching). The researchers argued that reflection is multi-faceted and that it can help pre-service teachers to make connections between theory and practice. They concluded that when instructors ask students to reflect, they must define what is expected in relation to the functions and reasons (e.g., for personal or professional outcomes), what the task may require (e.g., problem solving, teaching actions, ethical criteria), the focus of the reflection (e.g., anticipatory, inaction, or retrospective), and the structure (e.g., reframing, debriefing).

The selected literature referenced in the above review support the belief that written reflections are effective as learning tools. Given the frequency with which instructors in continuing education programs require written reflections of students, seeking the perceptions of graduates about the usefulness of written reflections to their learning and practice seems appropriate.

Methodology

The population for this study consisted of program completers from the first five cohorts of the doctoral program at Trevecca. A 13-item questionnaire was created using a Likert-scale response with one representing low or negative responses ("never," "none," "not," "hate it," or "great") and five indicating high or positive responses ("daily," "all," "really like," "none" "significant," or "extremely") depending upon the question. An email message with instructions about accessing an internet site where the questionnaire was posted was sent to graduates who were members of the first four cohorts for whom current email addresses were available. The questionnaire was available online for response for seven days. A problem occurred in the posting of the questionnaire so that a second email had to be sent to redirect the graduates. Ninety graduates comprised cohorts one through four; thirty-two responses were received from them. The same questionnaire, using hard copies, was administered to graduates in the fifth cohort on campus during the final meeting following completion of the last course. Twenty-one responses were obtained in person from Cohort 5 which comprised 100% of the cohort members. Responses from the two groups totaled 53.

Responses to Questions

The following narrative summarizes the responses to each of the questions. Table I gives the numeric tally of all responses.

Responding to question #1 regarding the frequency with which respondents had engaged in written reflection prior to attending the Ed.D. program, (58%) reported that they had “never” or “rarely” participated in written reflection, and 14 (26%) reported “occasionally” having participated in written reflections. Only eight (15%) reported that they had engaged in written reflection “often” or “daily.” In contrast, when asked in question #12 if they had continued to do written reflection after completing the Ed.D. degree, nine (18%) reported “never” or “rarely;” 21 (41%) reported occasionally; and 21 (41%) indicated “often” or “daily.”

Question #2 asked the respondents to estimate the percentage of courses in the Ed.D. program that required written reflections. One (2%) remembered one-fourth of the courses, six (11%) identified one-half of the courses, 24 (45%) responded that three-fourths of the courses required written reflection, and 18 (34%) indicated all courses had the requirement. When asked in question #3 to name the courses that included a required reflection component, most replied “all” or “nearly all.” The following courses were named specifically as requiring reflections: Leadership and Organizational Behavior I, II, and III; Action Oriented Research; Cultural Influences; Instructional Environments; Quality Education Trends; Technology III. Five professors were named as having made the requirement with one professor mentioned more frequently than others. Action Research and Technology I and II were identified as not requiring reflections.

Question #4 asked the degree to which graduates enjoyed creative writing in general. Four (7.5%) responded that they “don’t like it,” 15 (28%) said they could “take it or leave it,” 34 (64%) said they “enjoy” or “really like it.” When asked in question #5 if they enjoy reflective writing, three (6%) responded that they “don’t like it,” 12 (23%) responded that they can “take it or leave it,” 38 (72%) reported they “enjoy” or “really like it” reflecting, by the end of the program, an increase of four (7.5%) in those who enjoy or like reflective writing.

Question #6 asked the respondents to rate their level of discomfort with assignments that required written reflection. Only two (4%) reported “great” or “significant” discomfort; five identified “moderate” discomfort, and 43 (81%) reported “minimal” or no discomfort. When asked in question #7 if the degree of discomfort changed during the program, nine (17%) reported no or “minimal” change; ten (19%) selected “neutral” as their response; 22 (41.5%) reported “moderate” or “significant” change in the discomfort level. Responses to question #9 regarding to what degree reflective writing during the program had improved their writing skills resulted in ten (19%) respondents who said “none” or “minimal,” nine (17%) were neutral, and 34, or 64%, reported “moderate” or “significant” improvement in their writing skills.

Graduates were asked in question #8 to rate the usefulness of the required reflections to the improvement of their professional practice or goal attainment. One (2%) reported “not at all useful,” one reported “somewhat” useful, and four (7.5%) were neutral. Twenty seven or 50% reported that written reflections were moderately useful to practice or goal attainment and another 19 or 35.8% reported that the practice was “extremely” useful to them. A similar question, #10, asked if reflective writing was useful in clarifying professional issues. One (2%) responded “not at all useful,” two (4%) reported the practice to be “somewhat” useful, three (6%) were neutral, 22 responded that reflections were “moderately” useful, and 22 said they are “extremely” useful. These 44 respondents comprise 83% of the participants. Another related question, # 11, asked how useful written reflections were in helping them to identify goals. Again, one (2%) responded “not at all” useful, another one (2%) responded “minimally” useful, a third one (2%) was neutral; 28 (53%) responded that written reflections were “moderately” useful in the identification of their goals, and 20 (38%) reported that reflections were “extremely” useful in goal identification; the last two categories totaled 94% of the respondents.

Question # 13 asked to what degree the graduates consider written reflections to be an important part of learning in a doctoral program. One (2%) responded “not at all” important; three (6%) responded “minimally” important; eight (15%) rated reflections as “moderately” important in a doctoral program; 11 or 20% said “significantly,”

and 29 or 55.7% said reflections are “extremely” important to doctoral learning.

The responses for each question are reported for two groups—first the email responses from

members of cohorts 1-4 and second the responses from members of cohort 5. These are followed by the total for both groups

Table I

Number of Responses by Participants to Each Question on Likert Scale

Question / Category	Never	Rarely	Occasional	Often	Daily	Total Cohort
1. Prior to your participation in the EdD program, how frequently did you spend time reflecting on or evaluating in writing your professional practice?	46	129	104	52	10	3221 1-45
	10	21	14	7	1	53 All
Courses	None	¼	½	¾	All	Total Cohort
2. Estimate how many courses included assignments that required formal reflection.	00					
3. Identify courses that required written reflection.	0	01	42	1113	135	3221 1-45
	See narrative	1	6	24	18	53 All
12. To what degree do you continue to do formal written reflections on your professional practice?	10	44	138	125	22	3219 1-45
	1	8	21	17	4	51 All
Writing Enjoyment	Hate it	Don't like	Take or leave it	Enjoy	Really like	Total Cohort
4. How do you rate your enjoyment of creative writing in general?	00	13	105	137	86	3221 1-45
	0	4	15	20	14	53 All
5. How do you rate your enjoyment of reflective writing?	00	12	102	1411	76	3221 1-45
	0	3	12	25	13	53 All
Discomfort level	Great	Significant	Moderate	Minimal	None	Total Cohort
6. What degree of difficulty/discomfort did you experience completing assignments the required written reflection?	10	11	25	209	86	3221 1-45
	1	2	7	29	14	53 All
Change/Improve	None	Minimal	Neutral	Moderate	Significant	Total Cohort
7. To what degree did that discomfort change as the program progressed?	81	38	73	106	42	3221 1-45
	9	11	10	16	6	53 All

9. To what degree did the written reflections improve your writing skills?	31	32	36	136	105	3221	1-45
	4	5	9	19	15	53	All
Usefulness	Not	Somewhat	Neutral	Moderate	Extremely	Total	Cohort
8. How useful was the required reflection to the improvement of your professional practice or professional goal attainment?	10	01	13	198	118	3221	1-45
	1	1	4	27	19	53	All
10. How useful were the reflections in helping to clarify important issues related to your professional practice?	10	22	12	1111	175	3221	1-45
	1	4	3	22	22	53	All
Goals	Not	Minimal	Neutral	Moderate	Extremely	Total	Cohort
11. How useful were the written reflections in helping you to identify professional goals?	10	11	10	1414	155	3220	1-45
	1	2	1	28	20	52	All
Importance	Not	Minimal	Moderate	Significant	Extremely	Total	Cohort
13. To what degree do you consider written reflections to be an important part of learning in a doctoral program?	10	12	53	74	1811	3220	1-45
	1	3	8	11	29	52	All

Interpretation of Results

Based on the results of the responses to the questionnaire, the following conclusions were drawn.

- When reviewing questions #1 and #12, there was an increase of 33% in the number of persons doing occasional reflections and 50% increase in the number doing reflections often or daily. These increases were from the time of entry into the Ed.D. program compared to following graduation from the program.
- At least three-fourths of the courses in the Ed.D. program require written reflections. The only courses identified by respondents as not having a reflection requirement were the research and technology courses.
- Results suggested that graduates dislike or like creative writing and reflective writing to approximately the same degree. Only four more respondents reported enjoying or really liking reflective writing after the Ed.D. experience than

had reported enjoying creative writing prior to entering the program.

- The majority (81%) of respondents reported having experienced minimal or no discomfort completing reflective writing assignments.
- The majority (64%) reported that they believed such assignments led to improvement in their writing skills.
- The majority (89%) reported that reflections were useful in improving professional practice or goal attainment.
- The majority (83%) reported that reflections were useful in clarifying professional issues.
- The majority (90%) reported that reflections were useful in identifying professional goals.
- The majority (76%) believed that written reflections are an important component in a doctoral program.

Recommendations and Implications for Christian Educators

Based on the responses of participants in this evaluative study which implied that written reflections are important and useful in a variety of ways, I recommend that instructors in all courses in the Ed.D. program include written reflections as significant assignments. This is useful for two reasons. The first is to increase critical thinking, and the second is to improve writing skills. Instructors in undergraduate and master's level courses should identify opportunities to include written reflections in meaningful ways. In addition, instructors themselves should reflect in writing concerning the quality of their teaching and the strategies that they employ when working with students. It appears that reflective writing is useful, not only for professional assessment, but also for goal achievement; therefore, adults may find engaging in reflective writing to be a useful tool in personal development.

Educators at all levels should embrace the national standards that call for teachers to be reflective practitioners. Being...Knowing...Doing are essential components of quality Christian educators that are enhanced by reflection. To avoid criticisms about lack of quality that are sometimes directed toward educational programs in faith-based institutions, it is essential for Christian educators to evaluate the quality of their teaching and other professional endeavors. Thoughtful reflection, especially when completed in writing over a period of time, is a useful tool for evaluation of performance and for identifying areas for improvement. Attention to continual development of professional knowledge (Knowing), skills (Doing), and appropriate attitudes (Being) is essential for personal and professional growth and for modeling desired behaviors for students. People of faith should embrace the goal to be excellent examples in all things and, in this way, bring honor to Christ and to faith-based institutions. By reflecting on practice, participating in the professional community, and pursuing spiritual development, Christian educators demonstrate important qualities that others will desire to emulate. "Because of who we are (Being), we seek to learn (Knowing), and to teach (Doing)." (Conceptual Framework 2008)

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