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Reflective Journaling: Innovative Dialogue in LIS Education

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Abstract:

Innovative pedagogy, embedded in LIS courses structures, is desired and strengthens LIS preparation. Including reflection as one such strategy can assist in building the reflective practice LIS educators hope students maintain in the field. While widely used in teacher preparation courses (Hodgins, 2014) reflective journaling equally aligns with the text-based nature of LIS coursework, especially as more LIS schools move to online formats (Kymes & Ray, 2012).

This phenomenological case study explores structured, dialogic journaling as a pedagogical tool to inform the reflective practice of preservice librarians. Journals were introduced as a teaching tool in an early LIS course and structured using Schon's (1987) Reflective Practitioner model. Additional points of data collection included journals from a faculty-guided teaching experience and a final journal entry collected after one year of practice. Findings explore participant perception on reflection through incorporated use of reflective journals to explore reflection in action, reflection on action, and reflection on reflection in action as a structured exercise. Implications suggest journaling as a teaching tool in LIS programs might promote more reflective practitioners and practitioners who are better able to critically reflect on practice when provided the experience in coursework.

Keywords: Reflection, LIS Education, Journals, Pedagogy, Reflective Practitioner

Introduction

For many seeking a LIS education, increased availability of online programs and coursework make a degree more readily attainable (Kymes & Ray, 2012). Innovative pedagogy in LIS programs can be difficult to incorporate, particularly when teaching in an online format. Creative teaching methods built into course structures are required to foster student self-efficacy in the reflective practices LIS educators hope students develop and maintain in their daily practice once they graduate. However, DiSalvo (2007) contends, that due to the individualized, text-based nature of online instruction, interactive pedagogical structures continue to remain elusive in LIS education. Higher education challenges academics to continuously seek new ways to meet the needs of students.

LIS students entering the field benefit from a reflective approach to learning. Reflective journaling has been used in pre-service teacher preparation courses (Hodgins, 2014) as one means to assist new or emerging teachers identify those methods and strategies they hope to reinforce in practice and to further modify those practices identified as less effective. Beginning teachers who are more reflective about their practice are more intentional about their teaching and are therefore more effective. But, being reflective does not necessarily come naturally or easily (Applebaum, 2014). Reflection can be strengthened when it is taught and fostered through a supported relationship. For the purposes of this study, a reflective journal is defined as a journal in which emerging school librarians think about and critically engage in internal thought, dialogue and contemplation with the connections of theory and practice. Journaling can be useful in helping to shape the professional identity of pre-service professionals but is most successful when used within the dialogue between student and knowledgeable mentor. A dialogic journal strengthens this further with student reflection mirrored by an instructor entry.

Problem Statement

Scholars (Schon, 1987; Kreber et al., 2005) contend that reflecting on the process of professional practice enhances one's professional ability. Foundational skills of reflection (Feiman-Nemser, 2003) prepare pre-service professionals for practice. When modeled and used as a pedagogical tool, these skills gain relevance and depth. Incorporating this practice into LIS courses provides a model of supported structure for the reflective approach that can then be used beyond coursework. This study explores the use of dialogic journaling as a pedagogical tool to encourage reflective practitioner thinking in LIS education. This phenomenological case study chronicles the journey of LIS students as they complete coursework and early experiences in their field.

This study is guided by the following questions:

- To what extent do LIS students engage in critical reflection during dialogue journals in LIS education coursework.
- To what extent does participation in journaling in a LIS program impact reflection in practice?

Significance of the Problem and Related Literature

In many service professions an internship or practical experience is expected. During this experience, students engage in apprentice-type activities. Here, coursework, best practice and up-to-date ideals integrate with what is observed in the field. Since Dewey (1910), LIS

educators, particularly those who teach in an online setting, have encouraged students to engage in reflection to infuse theory and belief with practice. As reflection gained a stronghold in higher education, increased models of reflection became standard practice in coursework to include journals, discussion boards, blogging, and e-portfolios (Dyment & O'Connell, 2014).

Studies (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011) show that unless instruction occurs on *how* reflection might be useful, student journals are “generally disappointing” (p. 95). To be effective in reflection, students must do more than write about their experiences. Critics of journaling have stated that journaling is not properly introduced as a reflective technique (Spaulding & Wilson, 2002). Bain et. al (2002) suggest that a mixture of teaching advice and developed writing prompts is one pedagogical method that assists in creating more effective reflection.

Educational theorist Friere (2000) challenged educators to examine the reciprocal relationship between teacher and student and student and teacher, using a collective reflection to discuss what is learned. The early “Dear Diary” study conducted by Heller et. al (2011) employed this type of open dialogic journal among doctoral students as they embarked on their final stages of coursework and began professional positions in a higher education setting. Their revisited article (Mackenzie, 2013) shared further perspectives on the benefits of using journaling as a pedagogy tool and a teaching strategy. The participatory practice of shared open journaling facilitated common dialogue among peers, however the lack of a knowledgeable mentor did not allow them to gain insight into teaching beyond their limited, shared understanding.

Feedback and constructive guidance are benefits of a shared student teacher journal. These personal interactions created positive relationships (Lauterbach & Hintz, 2005; Spaulding & Wilson, 2002). Greatest success was evident in higher education when a focused model of reflection was adopted (Etscheidt, Curran & Sawyer, 2012). Donald Schon's Reflective Practitioner model (1987) is one such model. The new *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* published in the United States by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL, 2018) builds on this model and encourages reflection as best practice for school librarians at any stage of their career. Aligning to this model straddles the foundations of educator preparation and the library science profession.

The Reflective Practitioner Model

Schon described multiple stages of reflection that help to build understanding for a practitioner in his/her field (Schon, 1987). *Reflecting-In-Action* happens at one moment in time. At this stage, an observer calls upon prior knowledge, skill and intuition to react to a problem of practice. This progresses to the next state, *Reflecting-On-Action*. Here the practitioner provides a systemic review of an experience, noting areas of perceived strength and weaknesses. This takes place shortly after a situation occurs. In the final stage, *Reflection-On-Reflection-In-Action*, the reflection can occur later. It is here that the practitioner may include other sources of information and may augment practical knowledge and theory within his/her review to begin to build a greater understanding and meaning to practice.

Using the reflective practitioner model (Schon, 1987), the pre-service professional is able to examine personal observations and practices and engage in an open exchange of ideas and dialogue with a mentor to explore beliefs. This allows for more development of the emerging information professional.

Study Design and Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

This research study explores the use of dialogic, reflective journaling in an online, asynchronous LIS education program to engage preservice library candidates in reflective practice as they progress through their program. Students in the LIS program were introduced to the practice of journaling in an early course. In this course, they were asked to observe experienced school librarians in the field and reflect on these observations in a shared faculty journal. The students were then asked to return to the exercise of journaling when completing a faculty-supervised practical experience. In this experience they work as a school library intern. In the internship, students reflected on their own practice in the shared journal. A final point of data collection was a final participant reflection, gathered from a follow-up survey distributed to participants after their first year in practice. Reflections were intended to capture participant reflective practices and interrogate their perceived benefits and challenges to reflecting on practice.

Eight course completers met all criteria for inclusion and five responded to the final survey. These five study participants provided access to journal entries as the source of data for this study. These journals were focused, private conversations between the emerging school librarian and the university faculty member. Topics were semi-structured; several faculty-prepared prompts were provided at the onset to encourage thoughtful inquiry on practice. Participants were then encouraged to write and respond to issues of concern or observation. All journal entries were analyzed to explore a scaffolded model of journaling dialogue infused in LIS coursework.

Methodology

Analysis included a combination of coding methods in an effort to develop conceptual themes that allowed the researcher to understand the participants past and present experiences and perceptions with reflective journals (Creswell, 2008). Codes used to analyze the data included a priori codes grounded in the literature (Schon, 1987) and inductive codes that emerged as a result of the journal entries. The codes were then categorized to explore thematic interrogation of participant responses as emerging LIS professionals (Patton, 2002).

Findings

Critical reflection within coursework

In one section of a newly developed LIS course designed to enhance pedagogy and practice, the practice of reciprocal, dialogic journaling was introduced. Students enrolled in the course first observed a practicing school librarian and reflected on their observations. This progressed to teaching with a detailed reflection on practice. Students used prompts to mirror the Reflective Practitioner Framework (Schon, 1987) to structure journal entries. The course instructor wrote mirrored entries in response to address specific student concerns. A final reflection entry occurred after one year in practice. Findings are discussed here using reflective practitioner structure.

Journaling on the Practice of Others: Thinking in Action

The most basic reflection conducted by the participants was a journal response to an observation of another practitioner. This experience helped the emerging practitioner make sense of both what the job was and what it might be like as they engage in the role of school librarian.

Best practice was readily identified through observations, and participants were quick to mention the disconnect in what they thought or had been taught should happen and what was happening in practice, “I did not see full collaboration of the classroom teacher. She was present in the room and the students did ask her questions, but the lesson seemed more librarian-taught than a collaboration between the two.” (Rebecca, 10/7/17). These early reflections provided opportunity for participants to self-reflect on what might be a solution as well as for the instructor to engage in a dialogue with the student on the disconnect in what Argyris & Schon describe as Theories in Use vs Espoused Theories (1974).

Tim also used this type of calibrated reflection while asking question for reflection and guidance.

The school librarian read Beverly Cleary since she loved it as a kid. They are well-written but I am wondering if students would connect with something more contemporary and faster paced. Students were respectful but I wondered how actively engaged there were. Question: How will I choose my read-alouds and how can they connect with what students are learning in class?” (10/10/17).

This allowed for dialogue with the faculty mentor as an opportunity for discussion.

Rebecca’s reflection demonstrated how a participant may observed effective activity, but also begin to merge what they were learning about best practice, “The majority of the students were engaged, although one group participated more in the conversation. If the librarian included some table talk or a turn and talk, it may have encouraged the quieter students to participate more in the discussions.” (11/13/17). The participants were able to identify ineffective practices or elements of lessons they did not want to emulate in practice through their observations. Nora observed a librarian who lacked student engagement in many of her lessons and did not display a classroom management system that was conducive to a positive atmosphere,

I hope that when I become a librarian, I will use each lesson I teach as an opportunity for student learning-involving questioning and inquiry. These lessons could have easily been done in the classroom. I found myself thinking, ‘What makes it a good lesson for the library?’ I also think that an important classroom management tool is setting the expectation each time, what I expect the class to do when I am reading a story. I hope that I will always try to be positive with my redirections. (Nora, 10/24/17).

These observed reflections occurred as part of a guided template, providing a structure to assist participants in the types of observation they should be making, rather than a superficial sweep of the learning environment. Further, as a pedagogical tool used for instruction, the journal helped the participant exchange ideas with the course instructor. Providing a safe space to question, wonder, and compare ideas of learned theory alongside observed practice provided a third space for discussion unique to their observations.

The reflection itself was important but learning to think beyond just observation and in a more critical way was the key goal of the journals to promote sustained use of reflective practice. This frequently included further direction or questioning in written response by the instructor to a journal entry. After a lengthy description on behaviors in the learning environment by Rebecca, an instructor comment included, “One thing I notice right away in your reflection is the attention to procedure in the library you observed. I wonder what your thoughts are on these procedures. It sounds as if the learners were on task and respectful. Can this be attributed to an emphasis on procedure or do you think there is another reason-- such as presence of a school wide behavior plan?” This type of further probing established the journals as an opportunity for formative feedback and a teaching tool. This prepared students for a critical review of their own practice.

Journaling on My Own Work: Thinking on Action

The initial phase of reflection on action involves infusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct. Journaling includes examining personal practice and aligning it to theory and instructional content. This experience helps practitioners engage in the role of school librarian while providing a means to deconstruct the activities after action.

The participants reflected on their teaching almost immediately after their lessons, helping them examine how a lesson went and what they may revise or change for next time. It also allowed the participants a time to celebrate a job perceived as well done. Common phrases in journal entries included *the most challenging part, what I would change if I taught this lesson again, one thing I would do differently*, and *overall it was a great lesson*. Most suggested changes were slight revisions to academic tasks. An example is when Beth states at the conclusion,

If I was going to teach this lesson again, I would develop some type of word bank. I did not originally have a word bank because the teacher said that she thought her kids could spell words. Overall, it was a great lesson and the students walked away very excited about completing a “Big Kid” task. (1/7/18).

As a pedagogy tool used for instruction, the journal helped the participants form ideas about the practice of school librarianship and provided a unique opportunity for the university faculty instructor to “see” the thoughts of the participants and respond to their individual concerns. Each participant encountered unique challenges as they began their teaching journey, the retained journals provided a link of communication between coursework and practice for participants to share their insights with a guiding mentor.

Impact on Practice: Reflection on Practice

Once moving into practice, reflection on practice provided an opportunity to continue the reflective practices that were introduced in the LIS program and infuse these into daily habits. Participant responses demonstrated reflective practice a year beyond coursework completion.

The participants infused a reflective approach into their daily routines. Rebecca describes, “As a practitioner I reflect constantly on my instruction and conversations. Sometimes it’s immediate and in the midst of instruction, as I see students needing more help than expected and sometimes it’s after a lesson in preparation for the next day as I see a class once a week” (April, 2019). She expressed a favorable view of reflection and the benefit of being a reflective practitioner. She plans to continue reflection in the development of her teaching and instruction as she progresses into her second year.

Nora engaged in a more systematic type of reflection. She described,

As a first-year librarian, all of my lessons were brand new. As I planned, I post-reflected on what part of my lessons were going well, what parts needed strengthening, I looked for patterns in student engagement. I tried to push myself to explore ways to incorporate other skills that are harder for me to include. I also reflected on whole-school programs that I oversee. Part of that involves problem solving the scheduling difficulties, teacher participation, and my own advocacy and promotion of events (April, 2019).

Reflective Dialogue

Sharing in the reflective process with a critical friend, mentor, or teaching peer was one lasting component each participant carried from the use of journaling as a pedagogical component in coursework. Shelly notes continued use of a critical peer for reflection in practice,

After teaching I reflect on my practice with my mentor, my literacy team, and sometimes administration. I have seen improvements this year because of these conversations. We discuss what is working and not working and also exchange ideas. I am looking forward to the changes that will take place next year as I put things in place (April, 2019).

Rebecca also embraces the use of critical friends, “In between classes, during lunch or during my planning period. I reflect with my Resource Team for input and feedback to help me improve my instruction and behavior management as they see the same students.” Likewise, Tim established a weekly reflective communication with a mentor librarian throughout his first year in practice. He describes,

A weekly check in with a library mentor has helped me to include reflection in my daily practice. Throughout the week, I keep track of things I have done and problems I have encountered. I usually have had time to work out possible solutions and can share them for feedback from the mentor. Our conversations help me work things out and see things I might have missed (April, 2019).

Beth engages with other librarians in her large county through an online support group. This extended network provides a place to share what has happened in her own library that went well but also to “talk out” ideas and get inspiration on things she may not have thought to try. In this way, Beth begins to reflect beyond her own knowledge of practice.

For all participants, the continued dialogue with another person has made a critical difference in reflecting on reflecting in practice, despite barriers that are present in each situation.

Perceived barriers to reflection on practice

All participants note a common and frequent barrier to reflection is time. The time in a school day and the time with the students is limited and leaves many new school library practitioners with little opportunity for deep reflection on their practice. Rebecca describes a fixed schedule, “after class there is only a 5-minute transition and I have to start preparing for the next class or I am still waiting for the present class to leave, so that in-between time becomes non-existent. (April, 2019)

Nora states her busy schedule has prevented her intentional engagement with reflection on practice, particularly involving others to share in the process with her. She struggles to include others as regularly as she would have hoped, “Reflection is best practice for improving teaching,” she laments and while she does not want to overburden another teacher’s time, she would value the opportunity to reflect alongside teaching peers to assess her lessons in supporting student learning.

Another barrier described by the participants included the ability to establish a process for reflection. The added commitment of developing a structure for reflection in addition to the many tasks and responsibilities of a new library position seemed daunting. Both Beth and Rebecca embraced the implementation of structure. Beth hoped to create a more formal, scheduled time to reflect, dedicating a few minutes at the end of the day to make notes. To this end she has begun to use planbook.com and adds, “this component will assist and make my reflections more available as I pull up lessons in the future to refresh on what worked well/didn’t”. Rebecca also stated plans for sustaining her reflective practice, “I plan to design/create a planner to help manage my time and lessons better next year. I want to include this with my reflections so I can jot down what activities went well, what was completed, and have a running document of instructional tools that I can try for the next class” (April, 2019).

Implications and Further Directions

Findings of this phenomenological case study help situate journaling within the context of LIS education. New library professionals must be prepared for all the roles and responsibilities of the job. This includes having a mechanism for self-reflection. Journaling activities introduced in courses seek to bridge the theory of coursework with practice in the field, asking the students participants to interrogate their work and leverage the question “who am I” as an information professional and “how is my practice emerging and growing” as a means of personal and professional identity development. The journaling activities achieved the goal of self-improvement in practice, as perceived by the participants, when used as one course strategy to aid students in connecting theories about learning to present experiences.

While some (Dyment & O’Connell, 2011) debate the effectiveness of the journaling experience to promote deeper, more sustained reflective practices, findings in this study demonstrate that when introduced in coursework, and conducted with reciprocal feedback, deep reflective practice was maintained as stronghold in practice. As supported by Applebaum (2014), introduction and instruction to journaling distinguishes the attitude students may have toward reflection in practice. Participants in this limited case study critically engaged in reflective journaling when it was introduced and practiced in their LIS coursework. Their guided reflections helped model a type of reflection to progress from identifying strong practice to dissecting their own practice through critical reflection. Reflective practices were sustained into practice through intentional and continued examination of practice, as well as the inclusion of others in the reflection cycle. In efforts to produce more reflective, critical thinkers who interrogate and make sense of their practice, educators in LIS programs will need to provide a supportive and instructional environment for reflection. These results offer a model that can be used by other education programs seeking to integrate reflective practices into coursework by infusing reflection as intentional pedagogy.

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