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Engaging the Reflexive Self: The Role of Reflective Practice for Supporting Professional Identity Development in Graduate Students

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Abstract

Reflective practice can enhance the professional identity development (PID) of graduate students. Struggling with one's self-awareness and

related academic assignments are part of a necessary process for ensuring student success as developing professionals. Yet, there are many salient barriers that can interfere with graduate students undertaking this process. Graduate students need to have the opportunity to engage in a reflective process, but they also require emotional safety to take the risks required. Appropriate faculty involvement and modeling of desired qualities is also fundamental. Strategies are suggested to address student needs.

Overview

If professionals do not take the time to reflect upon significant moments in development, did learning take place? The reflective practices engaged in throughout the graduate career are consistent with Bolton's (2014) definition: "an in-depth review of events, either alone—say, in a journal—or with critical support with a supervisor or group" (p. 7). These practices include reflective journal assignments, papers that outline personal understanding and cultural contexts, and reviews of developing theoretical models and case conceptualization ideas with the feedback of peers and supervisors.

Bolton (2014) asserted that reflective practice, done well, can lead to a greater understanding of events and integration of theoretical knowledge with professional practice. However, these practices ask a great deal of the developing professional as part of the aim is to question previously held assumptions about oneself and to develop previously underdeveloped skills. Educators often assume that individuals know how to reflect and have the necessary self-awareness to do so, but this assumption can be problematic. Further, if some sense of group safety is not embedded into the process, reflection can feel too risky to students, and they experience resistance and can emotionally distance themselves from the learning experience (Quiros, Kay, & Montijo, 2012). The risk required in engaging in professional development reflection coupled with the lack of clear guidelines for a safe environment will not lead professionals-in-training toward success. Instead, these practices may result in students being stalled in their professional development or not engaging with the material. The outcome of this may be that a student lacks the essential bedrock for making ethical decisions that are an integral part of their professional development (Bolton, 2014).

Literature Review

Researchers have studied how reflective practice affects students' professional identity development in the fields of medicine (Goldie, 2012; Sharpless, Baldwin, Cook, Kofman, Morley-Fletcher, Slotkin, & Wald, 2015), nursing (Bulman & Schutz, 2013), teacher education (Roffey-Barentsen & Malthouse, 2013; West, 2012), and social work (Wilson, 2013). Counsellor educators have analyzed PID's link to reflective practices, citing the importance of transformative experiences for counsellor development (Shuler & Keller-Dupree, 2015), the need for reflective learning within a counsellor training curricula (Tobin, Willow, Bastow, & Ratkowski, 2009), and the need for reflective practice to encourage self-awareness and competent practice (Rosin, 2015). Counsellor education in Canada is often underrepresented in the literature, but foundational work by Collins, Arthur, and Wong-Wylie (2010) has drawn scholar-practitioners' attention to the utility of reflective applications for training counsellors in multicultural competencies and how certain activities in graduate school can contribute to one's development as a counsellor (Chang, 2011).

Some educators have written about the necessity of including emotional growth and awareness as part of professional training programs (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014). Educators also acknowledge that encouraging emotional growth without ethical guidelines and emotional safety can be detrimental to students. In their observations about teachers-in-training, Ronfeldt and Grossman (2008) indicated that these students often felt insecure, lonely, and disillusioned about their profession before even finishing their field experiences and linked this to poor student retention. They proposed that students in certain professional fields—including teaching, the clergy, and psychology—be given opportunities to practice their skills in facilitative environments with structured feedback from both peers and instructors (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008).

Instructors who teach reflection must model genuineness, reflexivity, and emotional awareness in their teaching and professional practice (Matteson, Taylor, Valle, Fehr, Jacob, & Jones, 2011; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Quiros et al. (2012) highlighted the necessity of students, instructors, and field supervisors co-creating a sense of emotional safety so that students may learn the nuances of their chosen professions. Matteson et al. (2011) indicated that faculty must be willing to model the qualities they are attempting to draw out in students to enhance student retention. Lastly,

Cox, Zhu, Lynch, and Adams (2012) highlighted that mentors (who may or may not be faculty or supervisors) can provide emotional support to graduate students who are going through professional training programs and improve retention.

Educators can build safety into reflective practices with the intention to support students in making connections in the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains, both inside and outside the classroom learning experience.

Integration into the Student Experience

One constant remains within the scholarship of teaching and learning—the fundamental need for learners to situate their PID within their curriculum of study (Hart & Montague, 2015; Tan, Van der Molen, & Schmidt, 2016). Often absent from discussions is the fact that each student has unique narratives to bring to the inclusive classroom learning environment. Certain aspects of reflective pedagogy can be administered either in online, face-to-face, and blended graduate training formats (Langley & Brown, 2010; Murdock, Williams, Becker, Bruce, & Young, 2012). However, completing reflective assignments such as journals or self-reflective papers are not enough to enhance students' PID and are necessary but not sufficient to encourage their success as beginning professionals.

An emotionally safe classroom with well-defined guidelines (Quiros et al., 2012) and the ability to observe and absorb the professional qualities of an instructor, supervisor, or role model must also be present for students to have an enhancing learning experience (Matteson et al., 2011). These last two components are best integrated into the student experience as face-to-face components. It may be difficult to create an emotionally safe climate in online environments, as it is difficult for instructors to assess the feel or tone of a “room,” particularly when asynchronous online discussions are occurring. Although emotional learning can occur online (Rowe, 2005), it may be a challenge for the instructor to judge if and when emotional “shutdowns” may be occurring.

An optimal way to create emotional safety to support reflective practice is to involve students in the creation of guidelines for the face-to-face

classroom and related activities. Questions such as: *What do you as a learner, within the context of this classroom learning community, require to feel safe and respected by all members?* Students also need to develop their self-awareness and self-regulation skills so they may feel empowered to take the risks required for reflective learning. Again, in an ideal university community, the process of reflective practice is best introduced during initial coursework and encouraged throughout and beyond degree completion. By integrating these ideas into the graduate student experience, we will be able to better support student success in engaging in reflective development.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

Wong-Wylie (2007) described five elements that are facilitative of reflective practices. From these five, her research indicates that three show up most often in students' recollections of critical moments in their graduate professional education: engaging in reflective tasks, having self-trust/risking, and interacting with supportive academic personnel. These can be integrated into educational programs, and as an example, they have been integrated into the Master of Counselling program at City University of Seattle in Calgary, Alberta.

Engaging in Reflective Tasks

Students can be taught to engage in self-reflection from start to finish. In their applications, students write a personal response paper that invites them to engage actively in self-awareness and write about why they want to be in the program. Once admitted, during New Student Orientation, students create a self-care plan for the duration of their studies as graduate students. Faculty can further creatively infuse reflective practice into all domains of a curriculum by

- modeling the message—actively engage in reflective practice;
- sharing initial experiences with reflective practice—as a graduate student or beginning professional;

- identifying the cost/benefits of reflective practice to the learning experience;
- discussing the bigger picture and inform students what's in it for them;
- creating a template or an example to help students get started; and
- explaining that engaging in reflective practice is a challenging process and that faculty is there to support students.

Having Self-Trust/Risking

Engaging in self-reflection represents an intrapersonal and vulnerable endeavor. The creation of a safe learning environment presents an essential first step in establishing a climate for engaging in collaborative sharing of learning and insights. As reflective practitioners, personal learning experiences (especially those that were lacking in safety) have offered significant insights into “better ways” of engaging in inclusive practice. The following suggested strategies should be considered:

- Actively engage each climate as a learning culture within itself
- Create and maintain community norms and agreements to support and nurture safety
- Adopt the teaching philosophy that “if uncomfortable, one is learning,” taking note that there is a fundamental difference between uncomfortable and unsafe
- Encourage learners to self-monitor and manage their reflections as possible new insights and transformative opportunities for growth
- Instill a culture of confidentiality (identifying limits of confidentiality based on the requirements of regulatory bodies) where students feel safe sharing ideas with the instructor and other members of the classroom culture
- Engage in ongoing discussions surrounding self-reflection as a process orientation, rather than a completed product (i.e., journal or blog)
- Infuse an assignment that requests students to “reflect on reflecting”
- Discuss and have students summarize essential counsellor dispositions such as being aware of biases, and being open to feedback and their implications.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

The scholarship of teaching and learning has consistently demonstrated that learners are more engaged and easier to retain when they feel acknowledged and supported. It should be a priority to be both visible and accessible to learners via office hours, Skype, and before and after classes. It is important that educators create and maintain professional boundaries with learners, as there is always a possible danger of engaging in a duality of relationship. Students should be provided with external resources to engage in self-care. By being proactive, faculty members not only model professionalism but also demonstrate that they care about a student's well-being through the provision of external resources. Wong-Wylie's (2007) elements of supportive collegial interactions with students, in relation to reflective practice, are the basis for the following suggestions:

- Demonstrate interest in the lived experience of learners
- Create and nurture an environment of curiosity and reflection
- Share campus/community resources should a student require additional assistance based on their reflections or the process (i.e., campus counselling centre)—know when to refer students
- Foster a compassionate approach to supporting learners in their development of self-awareness as it relates to their PID, specifically acknowledging that it can be a risky endeavor and that students can be at different levels with this
- Model healthy boundaries and communication skills when resolving conflict with students or colleagues

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