

PROMOTING DEEP LEARNING THROUGH PERSONAL REFLECTIVE E-JOURNALING: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Social work educators are in the business of forming social workers. We are concerned not only with the transmission of knowledge and skills; we want to shape the whole person to become a professional social work practitioner (Dempsey, Halton & Murphy, 2001). To achieve this, we strive to facilitate deep learning among students – the kind of learning that enables students to locate themselves in their learning (Collins & Van Breda, 2010), to construct personal meaning (Clare, 2007). A deep learning approach, Marton and Säljö (1976) argue, involves sense making and having multiple understandings of our world, while a surface learning approach involves rote learning or memorisation of facts. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) add a third approach known as a strategic learning approach, which entails students purposefully managing their time, study methods and developing an awareness of assessment processes.

The achievement of deep learning, particularly with large numbers of students, however, is challenging for a number of reasons. With larger classes, educators may neglect experiential and adult learning approaches and rather adopt a lecture-based strategy as the most convenient method to cover the required content. Such an educational approach tends towards surface learning. Students may lack in-depth engagement in their learning as a result of their psychosocial vulnerability, which distracts them from the demands of learning (Van Breda, 2011), or because they are not genuinely interested in studying social work. And less than optimal assessment practices, such as opting for multiple-choice and short-answer questions instead of activities that require analysis and synthesis, may encourage learning that is focused primarily on knowledge acquisition. As a result of these challenges, students often adopt a surface approach to learning.

It is our belief that personal reflective e-journaling, requiring students to link classroom learning with their personal life experiences, may facilitate deeper learning. In this paper we present a case study of a third-year social work course on HIV to illustrate this use of reflective e-journaling. Drawing on a range of learning theories and classroom data, we hope to construct a picture of how students can be assisted to engage deeply and holistically with the learning experience.

JOURNALING TOWARDS DEEPER LEARNING

Reflection in education involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice, while being coached by professionals in one's discipline (Schön, 1995). According to Taylor and White (2000), reflection involves a focus on applying theory to practice. Linking what one has learned to one's own experience (present or past) contributes to the retention or application of knowledge. Fook and Gardner (2007) take this further by arguing that a bridge is built between our experiences and those of others through critical reflection and presents an opportunity for change. Social workers could thus use critical reflection to change their own behaviour, thinking and feeling toward others (Constable, 2010). According to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), reflection is a conscious activity in which students actively think about past experiences, consider and then assess them. Reflection allows for questioning experiences and thoughts, and is essential for social work (Horner, 2004).

Central to learning is the process of getting to know the self (Bates, 2003). This involves connecting with the learning at a deeply personal or emotional level. Students should thus be given opportunities to reflect on course material and connect it to their own lives. Our contention is that the integration of intellectual and personal will lead to deep learning that endures. Students learn better when the content evokes their personal experiences and emotions. When information is emotionally relevant, it comes alive and students are likely to better understand, remember and apply it, resulting in deeper learning. Such learning goes beyond academics and the development of the intellect, and includes “physical, emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual growth” (Miller, 1999:46).

This paper presents a case study of social work students doing a third-year course called “Health, Illness and Psychosocial Support”, which focuses on HIV and social work responses to HIV. The course comprises seven twice-weekly, two-hour classes – a compact and intensive learning experience. Classes utilise a range of learning methods, including lectures, video, role-plays and small group discussions. In addition, students participate in a group assignment and an individual assignment.

One of the six learning outcomes for this course is for students to “personally appropriate principles for healthy living.” This outcome was formulated for several reasons. First, various South African studies have found HIV and unplanned pregnancies to be key factors that hinder academic progress and learning among university students (Van Breda, 2011). In addition, the high prevalence of HIV among educators and also health professionals in South Africa is well documented (Shisana, Peltzer, Zungu-Dirwayi & Louw, 2005) and indicates that even human service professionals are not immune from contracting HIV. Thus, it was hoped that this course would equip students not only to assist others, but also to assist themselves towards healthier living. Second, to reduce the “othering” that occurs when social workers focus on ‘those clients out there’ and overlook the various ways in which we as social workers are not unlike our clients, it was considered important to look at HIV in relation to both the world and the self (Petros, Airhihenbuwa, Simbayi, Ramlagan & Brown, 2006). And third, once it had been decided to enhance academic learning through promoting personal learning, this needed to be explicitly reflected in the course outcomes, so that students knew there would be an active and gradable investment in personal growth.

The primary vehicle for facilitating and assessing this outcome is the personal reflective e-journal. The keeping of the e-journal is built into the Learning Guide of the course and is a mark-bearing learning opportunity. The Learning Guide provides an extensive rationale for the e-journal – that HIV is not just something ‘out there’, but also something that affects each one personally – and a solemn contract for absolute confidentiality by the lecturer, because the personal nature of the e-journal is unusual for students and can be experienced as exposing. Because 4.2% of our students are living with HIV (Van Breda, 2011:13), particular attention is given to setting up a safe, confidential and supportive environment for the e-journal.

The e-journals are captured in Blackboard, our learning management system. The Learning Guide requires students to capture an e-journal entry of at least 100 words after every class in which they reflect on what the material covered in class means to them personally. Students are required to capture their journals between classes, to allow regular and extended opportunity for pondering and processing the integration of academic and personal learning. We expect that students will take ownership of their learning and that their personal experiences will enrich the meaning of the abstract academic material (Kolb, 1984). The e-journal contributes 10% towards their semester mark – not a very large percentage, but enough to make the effort-mark ratio feel worthwhile. Marks are awarded for maintaining the e-journal as required and for the degree of personal and authentic engagement with the learning material.

The lecturer reads the e-journals on a daily basis and makes reference to them in each class, for example, commenting that many students are thinking about going for an HIV test. The lecturer regards the e-journals as a private space for individual reflection, and so does not engage with the students in dialogue – this is contracted with students upfront. In response to the first e-journal entries, however, individual feedback is given on whether the e-journal entries are sufficiently long, adequately personal and captured in time. After that, responses are given only if students reflect on something that is clearly painful or distressing, such as the death of a close family member, or if students ask direct questions to the lecturer, or if the journals are not adequately focused on personal reflection.

Using a qualitative, descriptive case study, therefore, this paper examines these students' use of a personal reflective e-journal aimed at promoting deep learning. We begin with a theoretical framework that underlies our use of these journals, followed by an outline of the methodology for data collection and a presentation and discussion of the findings. In our conclusions, we identify a number of key areas for further exploration.

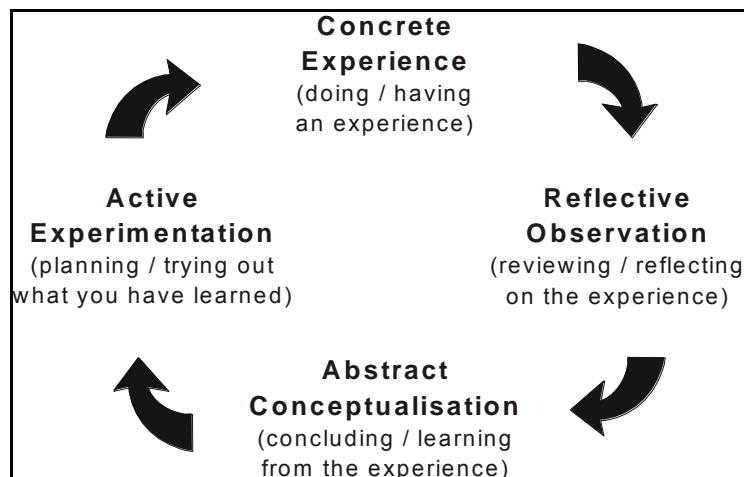
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PROMOTING DEEP LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION

Reflection on experience

The theoretical perspectives of experiential learning, transformational learning and deep learning were drawn on to make sense of the data. Experiential learning theory draws on the work of Dewey, Piaget and Rogers, among others, who saw *experience* as essential in learning and development (Kolb & Kolb, 2008; Moon, 2005). Dewey (1916), who stressed that experience is as important as theory, believed in the 'continuity' of experience – that one experience builds on the other and that we learn from our experiences, whether good or bad.

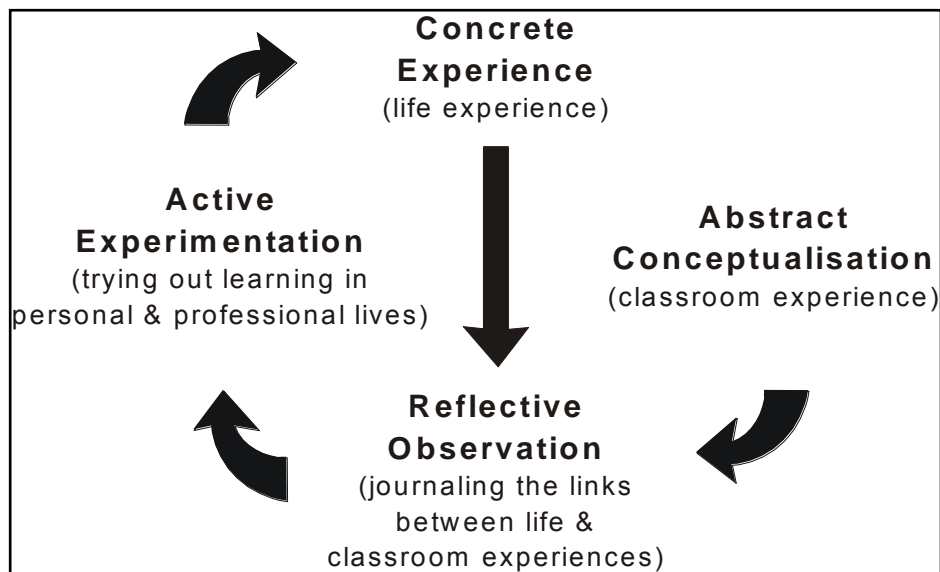
However, experiencing something does not automatically translate into learning or transformation (Merriam, 2004). Reflecting on the experience – to derive generalisations and formulate concepts that can then be applied to new instances – is also needed (Kolb, 1984). Similarly, Moon (2005) sees reflection as a form of purposeful thinking that results in a very specific outcome. It follows that the purpose of reflection must be made clear. Beaty (2003) adds that effective experiential learning requires an active process. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle illustrates this process neatly (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1
KOLB'S LEARNING CYCLE**



In the context of this study we adjusted Kolb's (1984) model to fit with the more traditional classroom lecture approach, which starts not with concrete experience but with abstract conceptualisation, with theory. In this revised model, student learning is informed by a combination of their life experiences (concrete experience) and the classroom experience (abstract conceptualisation). While the connection between these two sets of experiences is often not made in theory classes, this study's between-classes e-journal encourages students to thoughtfully integrate these two sets of experiences (reflective observation) and to consider the implications for their personal and professional lives (active experimentation) (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
KOLB'S LEARNING CYCLE ADJUSTED



Feelings and emotions in reflection

Social work literature gives considerable attention to reflection on practice, with particular emphasis on critical reflection (Fook, 2002; Lay & McGuire, 2009; Morley, 2008). But very little has been written about reflection on emotions and personal feelings. While critical reflection is a crucial academic activity, the importance of self-awareness should not be underestimated. Being aware of one's character, including strengths and weaknesses, is essential (Burnard, 1992). If one is not self-aware, the possibility of examining one's assumptions and feelings is at best limited. By implication, then, meaning-making occurs in terms of the self, with reflection directly influencing the development of the self (Le Cornu, 2009).

When emotions or feelings are regarded as unreliable, it may seem necessary to concentrate on facts, privileging the academic/intellect above the personal/emotional. In this paper, however, we argue for the necessity of reflection on personalised experiences to foster deep learning; feelings are as important as the intellect. An integrated approach is required that fosters both the academic and the personal, or the "external" and the "internal" (Moon, 2005:23).

Our point of departure is that holistic development will lead to deep learning. The aim is to develop the whole person through drawing not only on the intellect, but also on emotion (Boud *et al.*, 1985) or personal experience and feelings. It is our hope that students will assimilate the

facts more meaningfully and, in turn, learn more effectively and deeply. By not focusing solely on content or facts, a more holistic approach is possible.

Transformational learning: enhancing deep approaches to learning

Kolb (1984:21) states that personal experiences provide “life, texture and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts”. The emphasis on the personal is critical in making the abstract meaningful, translating into deep learning. This deeper level of learning is known as transformational learning (King, 2002). Merriam (2004) further explains that transformational learning includes a person’s values, beliefs and assumptions, as these are all used to make sense of experiences. Our students were thus asked to reflect on their personal experiences (past and present) to make sense of the information they received during lectures.

Students can be “transformed” through a process involving a “disorientating dilemma” followed by critical reflection and new interpretations of experience (Mezirow, 1991:168). It is when students grapple with dissenting information (that is, information that conflicts with their taken-for-granted knowledge) and incorporate it into their lived experiences that transformation or deep learning occurs – existing meaning schemes begin to change. Mezirow (1991:5) asserts:

“Perhaps even more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances.”

A distinction can be made between objective and subjective reframing (Mezirow, 1997). Objective reframing involves reflecting on what others say, and is what students are often required to perform in academic essays. By contrast, subjective reframing, also known as “premise reflection” (Merriam, 2004:62), refers to reflecting on one’s own assumptions, feelings and interpretations in relation to new information. Reflective journal writing (Mezirow, 1997; Moon, 2005) may be a helpful pedagogic method to facilitate subjective reframing and premise reflection.

The type of transformational or deep learning that we describe here is not to be approached impulsively. Not all students will be willing to engage with such learning; some may prefer surface learning, focused on the recollection of decontextualised, depersonalised knowledge at the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (Moore & Stanley, 2010). Taylor (2000) indicates the importance of considering the “readiness” of students to engage in deep, transformational learning, a dynamic that is often overlooked. Learning activities should therefore start where the students are and incorporate processes to facilitate readiness for deep learning. To this end, Taylor (2000:155-156) proposed, amongst other things, that educators purposefully foster a “safe, open and trusting environment”; that we encourage the group to take ownership of its own learning; that we create a space where students can take prime responsibility for their own learning; and that we emphasise the interplay between “critical reflection and affective learning”. In the design and implementation of our course on HIV, we endeavoured to implement these proposals, with the expectation that this would create a transformational learning environment.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The aim of this case study was to understand and describe how deep learning by means of reflective online journaling was promoted through linking academic and personal life experiences. A descriptive research design, using a qualitative approach (Babbie & Mouton,

2001), was considered most appropriate to achieve this aim, though our study also includes a handful of quantitative data. We were interested in students' subjective experiences of their own learning within an academic context (Mouton, 2001).

A case study design (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) was selected to examine students' experiences of deep learning within the context of a specific social work learning module. A case study entails studying a particular phenomenon within a delimited setting. Thus, it was necessary to first sample a learning module that would provide optimal opportunity to witness reflective journaling enhancing deep learning. In other words, we needed to purposively collect data from a class that was most likely to present the "best information" for our purposes (Denscombe, 2010:34). We settled on the HIV course at third-year level at the University of Johannesburg for the three reasons discussed earlier concerning the course outcome. We believed that HIV is a subject that lends itself to deep and personal learning, because of the strong connections between the personal, academic and professional life worlds of students.

Seventy-one students took this course on HIV. They generated two sets of data. First, all 71 students participated in the reflective e-journaling as a course requirement. Second, at the end of the course, students were requested to participate in an anonymous, online study on their experience of the e-journaling component of the course. The method of data collection and analysis for these two sets of data are detailed below.

The first dataset was the students' e-journals. At the end of the course the lecturer invited students to give permission for the e-journals to be used for research purposes. Students were assured that their decision about whether or not to give consent would in no way influence their marks for the course. A clear effort was made to separate the academic requirements of the e-journals from the subsequent research interest to ensure the ethical basis of the study. Fifty-three of the 71 students (75%) gave written consent. Only one student refused (this student had provided personal information that was unique to this student and could perhaps have resulted in the student being identified); the others were either not present at that class or did not provide written responses.

The e-journals of those who consented to participate were stripped of identifying information, thereby ensuring the anonymity of study participants. The e-journals were not analysed for themes. Rather, they were reviewed to identify journal entries that illustrated how students linked academic and personal life experiences. Extracts from the e-journals will be provided to illustrate the learning process that journaling facilitates.

The second dataset was the students' post-course reflections on the learning experience. This study asked five closed questions on a five-point Likert scale, which were analysed with descriptive statistics (means and frequencies).

The study also asked one open question: "Do you have any comments on your experience of the personal reflection journal?" Sixty students (85%) participated in this component of the study. Responses to the open question were often detailed and lengthy. A thematic analysis of student responses to this question was conducted to identify key themes regarding students' experiences of learning through personal reflective journaling. Thematic rather than content analysis was used, because we were not able to predetermine what categories we expected to find in the data and because we were more interested in the textual aspects of the themes than in counting frequencies of categories (Ezzy, 2002). Through thematic analysis, "the researcher attempts to build a systematic account of what has been observed and recorded" (Ezzy, 2002:86).

After repeated readings of the responses to this question, we engaged in line-by-line open coding, which involves restating or even quoting the main topic of each line of text. These open codes were then read several times to identify common themes that emerged across texts. However, identifying coherent themes from the data was difficult. As soon as we separated texts into different themes, they overlapped and we struggled to reach consensus on which texts belonged in which themes. Through experimentation with various ways of coding the data, we realised that the vast majority of students addressed a single but complex theme, namely that the e-journal helped to bring together their academic learning with their personal lives. This theme includes three sub-themes, viz. “bringing together”, “academic learning” and “personal life”. In addition, a second distinct theme emerged, viz. “relating to another”.

FINDINGS: REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF PERSONAL REFLECTION JOURNALS

The e-journals

We begin with the e-journals themselves. Selected extended extracts from the journals provide a rich picture of the way in which our students engaged deeply with the learning. We will make links between these extracts and the theoretical framework presented earlier.

This first entry is from a student after the first class, in which the foundation of medical knowledge was taught:

“When I heard that I was going to learn about HIV/AIDS, I said to myself ‘I already know about it.’ But in today’s lecture I learned a lot. I used to think that I know a lot about HIV but I don’t. Personally, I think these lectures are going to be helpful as I am to take the information that I will have back home to my family, as my family structure is patriarchal and three of my relatives are infected with the disease.”

This journal entry exemplifies Taylor’s (2000) notion of readiness. This student, like many others, believes she knows all about HIV and is not interested in another HIV course. In her case there is the added personal contextual factor of having experienced HIV through members of her family. We see her grappling with whether she wants to engage with this course at all and observe the shift in her assessment of her knowledge and readiness. We also see her applying a specific facet of this lecture (patriarchy) to her life situation, thus opening herself to new learning.

The following entry was made by a male student following a class in which we addressed poverty and patriarchy as macro factors that drive the HIV pandemic in southern Africa:

“This lecture got me thinking. What are my personal thoughts about sexuality and do they contribute to the spread of HIV? Especially when I realise that as a man I hold so much power, which is a result of how society determined it to be. Would I be able to relinquish my own opinions, to then be open to my partner’s opinion? In the end she has a lot more to lose than I would if I gave HIV to her. I realised that since as a man I am seen as the one who determines everything, I should be responsible in my decisions.”

This student is beginning to grapple honestly with his privileged status as a male in a patriarchal world. He asks penetrating, critical questions and does not provide glib answers. We believe that this is a particularly important part of the professional development of our male students – men have to challenge their own patriarchal assumptions in order to develop the

capacity for critical thinking and anti-oppressive social work practice (Thompson, 2006). It is important that he is able to get beyond just the information about the drivers of HIV to recognise his own role in these drivers, thereby personally constructing meaning about his place in the world (Clare, 2007).

The fourth and fifth lectures addressed two theories of behaviour change (the trans-theoretical and health belief models). The fourth lecture also addressed the routes of HIV transmission and the kinds of sexual practices that increase the risk of HIV transmission. Following this lecture, a student made the following e-journal entry:

“I was so ashamed to listen to today’s lecture because it seemed like everything was pointing at me. I realised that I am engaged in a lot of risky behaviours, e.g. oral sex and orgies. I do it because we tell ourselves that we trust each other and we are making sex enjoyable, but I have now come to the realization that as I am jeopardizing my life. Taking into consideration the Stages of Change, I would rate myself under ‘contemplation’, because since the beginning of the lectures about HIV, I have become aware of my problem but was not doing anything. But now I want to work on ‘preparation’. I need to alert my partner so that he also can be aware, so we can both work on preparing ourselves to avoid unsafe sex.”

This student, like several others following this lecture, is taking on the material at a highly intimate level. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that she discloses information of such a personal nature in a journal that is read by her lecturer. It seems that by this stage of the course many students have become comfortable with the e-journal as a tool for self-reflection – a safe learning space has been created (Taylor, 2000). This student is clearly thinking hard about her own sexual behaviour, and linking this with the stages of change theory (Prochaska, Redding, & Harlow, 1994). The e-journal has allowed the student the opportunity to confront her risky behaviour within a safe and non-judgemental forum. This was one of the instances where the lecturer replied to the student, affirming her self-criticism and her intentions for behaviour change.

Following the fifth lecture, which addressed HIV prevention, a student made the following journal entry regarding the (male) lecturer’s demonstration of the use of the female condom:

“Thanks Dr Adrian for that life changing experience. It was an eye opening experience for my life personally, as I got to know new things about condoms. All I was able to do in the past was to check the expiry date and the rest I left up to my boyfriend. It is amazing to think that we leave everything up to the guy to ensure that both of us are protected. Now with knowing all of this I think it is about time that I did it myself.”

The student recognises and challenges her own co-option into a patriarchal system that leaves safer sex in the hands of men – a vivid example of subjective reframing (Mezirow, 2000), or premise reflection (Merriam, 2004), in which the student grapples with the dissonance between her own behaviour and this new information. In addition, it seems she has learned how to use a condom, how to demonstrate the use of a condom, the importance of social workers being willing to take risks and the place of gender roles in condom negotiation. We thus see an integration of personal and academic learning, facilitated by the e-journal.

The sixth class addressed bereavement in a rather light-hearted way. Students were divided into smaller groups, provided with a short piece of literature (Kübler-Ross, 2009; White, 1988/9; Worden, 1991) and asked to role-play an aspect of what they had read. We opened on a more

sombre note with a minute of silence for all those who had lived and died with AIDS, a ritual that many students commented on as meaningful. One student wrote:

“This lecture related to a recent personal experience whereby I lost my Mom (and Dad 12 years ago). I feel that I have more clarity on the grief process and how it affects me in my personal life. I found that the ideas by White, Kübler-Ross and Worden all relate to my life, one way or another. But I must state that it is not in Kübler-Ross’s sequence of stages. I find that sometimes I will be angry or feeling in denial, sometimes I will want to accept the reality and adjust to an environment without both my parents, but also at times I just want to say ‘hullo’. This lecture gave me a better understanding of my grief and gave me more strength to seek my own way of adjusting to a new life.”

The e-journal gives this student a forum to engage with personal and painful feelings of loss that are still echoing in her current life context. This allows her to touch gently on both the intellectual and the personal (Moon, 2005). We see a growth in her self-awareness as she applies the theories to her own experience (Burnard, 1992). She finds aspects of the theory helpful and some of it she criticises. This critical and personal engagement with the material is exactly what we hope to see.

In the final class, which entailed an integration of everything that had been covered in the previous classes, the lecturer underwent an HIV rapid test in front of the class. All the students clustered around him while the university nursing sister did HIV pre-test counselling with him and performed the test.

“I got motivated with regard to going for an HIV test after seeing Adrian doing one in front of us. I am now very sure that I will be going for my HIV test this week. I am very nervous though; however, when Adrian acknowledged that he was anxious I realised that there are people who share the same feelings as me and yet are courageous to go for an HIV test. I have learned that anxiety is a barrier that I can overcome. I have also come to realise why it is also important for me to go for an HIV test.”

This student’s reflection is similar to those of many of the students after this class. The lecturer’s HIV test evoked strong feelings – anxiety that he would test positive in front of them and fear about the needle and the sight of blood. However, it serves as a cue to action (Prochaska *et al.*, 1994) for some to actually get tested. In fact, several students had already gone for an HIV test during the course as a way of proving to themselves that they were serious about HIV. In this journal entry we see a student grappling with her own anxiety and doing a kind of “self-therapy” by telling herself that her anxiety about changing her behaviour can be overcome.

Student feedback on the e-journal experience

From this small sample of e-journal extracts we can see that our students engaged deeply with their learning, integrating both academic and personal facets. We have also seen several of the theoretical aspects of deep and transformational learning, which were discussed earlier in this paper, evidenced in the growth of the students. Inasmuch as the e-journals facilitated reflection on the course material, we also wanted our students to reflect on the e-journaling as an educational activity. We thus turn to an analysis of the research data to determine how the 60 students who participated in this part of the study understood their own deep learning.

From the closed questions we learned that the vast majority of students experienced the e-journaling positively – 88% felt that the e-journal helped them apply the course material to themselves and 84% felt it deepened their learning in the course. Although we were concerned about the extent to which students might find the journaling exposing and the ethical implications of this, 84% of students were comfortable with the lecturer reading their journals. Most students (84%) recommended that the e-journal be used in future.

The thematic analysis identified two themes from the open question. The first theme, “bringing together academic learning with personal life”, included three sub-themes, viz. “bringing together”, “academic learning” and “personal life”. The second theme was called “relating to another”. We discuss each of these in turn.

Bringing together

This first sub-theme under the theme “bringing together academic learning with personal life” concerned the experience of students that the e-journal facilitated integrative learning. This learning was not only about academic knowledge and skills, but also about personal growth. Moreover, students recognised that the boundary between academic and personal is blurred and, in the case of social work education, artificial. Five key phrases appeared regularly among these texts: *engage*, *relate*, *apply*, *internalise* and *bring close to home*. The following texts are provided as exemplars:

“It was very helpful, as I got a chance to relate some of what I have learned in class to my personal life.”

“It helped me internalise what was going on the lecture, because you know you are going to write it in the journal later on.”

“It helped me bring close to home/heart the things I’ve been learning in class.”

“Once a person makes something personal, it makes the learning make more sense because you explore your own personal feelings.”

These exemplars are indicative of a deeper level of learning or transformative learning (King, 2002). It appears that there is no need to subordinate the personal/emotional to the academic/intellectual as emotions and personal experience are central to learning.

Academic learning

Students made numerous references to the way the e-journal facilitated their learning of the course material. Thus, although the e-journal was primarily a personal reflection, they felt that it also helped them master the content that was taught. In most cases students alluded to the personal nature of the learning – this was more than just memorising facts about HIV – but the emphasis of these texts was primarily on learning course information. Key words that appeared here included: *revise/review*, *remember*, *think* and *understand*:

“I feel that the journal truly made us reflect on what we had learned – we were able to revise by actually applying what we had learned to our own experiences.”

“I liked it because it made me remember what I have learned and how I have felt.”

“It really made me think. And the use of marks forced me to really think about what I was learning in class and if I understood what I was taught.”

“I think it is a good way of learning. I really enjoyed it because it keeps reminding you about what you did in the previous lecture.”

Essentially, then, this finding confirms that students need to connect with the learning not only on an academic level, but also a deeply personal or emotional level (Dewey, 1916) and that the e-journal was a good pedagogic tool to foster reflection (Mezirow, 1997; Moon, 2005). The integration of intellectual and personal has thus led to learning that is more enduring.

Personal lives

The third sub-theme within the broader theme of ‘bringing together academic learning with personal life’ concerned the way the e-journal facilitated personal growth and learning. This was clearly aligned with the lecturer’s agenda – not only to facilitate academic learning but also personal learning. Here students reported on how they were enabled to engage with their own (often painful) feelings, behaviours and life experiences. Key words that appeared here included: *health, emotions, experiences* and *mistakes*:

“The journal was very helpful for me because it helped me to focus on my health issues more than before, because when I was writing I was able to see what I am lacking when it comes to this and that, so I could then tell myself that I should consider doing something in order to live a healthy life.”

“It helped me evaluate my life and to know what I needed to do to make sure that I did not get infected. It also made me think of things that I had never thought about before.”

“The journal was a wonderful way of debriefing. It provided me with an opportunity to be honest and to share what was really paining me.”

“It was like a second chance to look at the mistakes you have made and learn from them.”

Here we see evidence of premise reflection (Merriam, 2004) or subjective framing (Mezirow, 1997), where students reflect on their own assumptions, feelings and interpretations in relation to new information. In addition, there seems to be a continuity of experience (Dewey, 1916) and an indication that students learn from both good and bad experiences.

Relating to another

The second major theme that emerged in this study concerned the interpersonal aspect of the e-journal. Although we regarded the e-journal as a private and individual space, the lecturer read the journals on a daily basis and, from time to time, replied to students, within 24 hours of the journal being posted. This appears, for some students, to have created an experience of engaging with another person – the lecturer in this case – at a deeper and more intimate level. Key words included: *share, listen, understand, therapy* and *relationship*:

“It was nice to lay some feelings out and know that they were listened to.”

“I personally think it was like therapy to me. It really helped me to share issues that I honestly think I would not have shared with anyone.”

“I felt that the journal enhanced my relationship with Dr Adrian, especially as he now knows my fears and experiences about HIV and AIDS.”

“I felt comfortable telling what I’m going through. It was much easier for me to say what I was feeling inside without being judged.”

“Personally, I think it was helpful because the lecturer was reading them and responded to questions that I posted.”

These exemplars suggest that some students were grateful for the opportunity to connect with the lecturer on a more personal level and they appreciated the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences. This is indicative of a growing readiness (Taylor, 2000) to share and probably contributed to the transformational or deep learning that they had experienced. Furthermore, their willingness and ability to be self-aware (Burnard, 1992) has enhanced the ability to reflect, which in turn has resulted in deep learning.

SUMMARY

These data illustrate that our students experienced the e-journal as helping to bring together two often disparate facets of themselves – the social worker and the self. This was the key purpose of the e-journal, thus an encouraging finding. Students felt that the e-journal helped them reflect deeply on their own personal lives – about their feelings, life experiences, behaviour and health – and also on their academic learning – about understanding and revising the information shared. Essentially students felt that the personal reflection helped deepen the academic learning and that the theory helped them reflect in new ways on their own lives. In this way the adjusted experiential learning cycle presented in Figure 2 is illustrated, as students reflect on the interface between life experiences and classroom experiences.

It is also interesting to note that the interpersonal nature of the e-journal was also meaningful to some students. They had a unique interpersonal encounter with the lecturer through these e-journals, in which they had the opportunity to share very personal information that, under ordinary circumstances, they might not share with anyone, least of all a lecturer.

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

For the sake of completeness, the comments of three students who did not like the e-journaling are provided:

“It’s totally unfair. Why should we get marked for our personal feelings? When I become a social worker I am going to put my feelings aside.”

“Only that it requires time to be able to reflect on my own thoughts, feelings and behaviour and sometimes I just wrote without ever thinking about it.”

“It was good to make us apply the course in our own lives. I just think that the marks allocation should have been only if you did the reflection and not on the content, as some of us are more affected than others.”

These comments indicate that the personal nature of the journaling is, for some students, threatening or that they experience themselves as being personally disconnected from the HIV pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

We set out to describe the use of reflective e-journaling to deepen students’ learning through helping them personalise the information taught in a social work theory class. Our data reveal that the majority of students experienced the e-journals positively and were able to articulate that journaling facilitated deep and holistic engagement in learning. Students perceived that the e-journal facilitated both academic learning and personal growth.

Many writers (Beaty, 2003; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2005) have emphasised the importance of reflection in learning. In our case study it is apparent that students valued the opportunity not only to absorb information, but also to engage critically and personally with the information.

Our particular emphasis on emotions, as suggested by Burnard (1992) and Le Cornu (2009), appears to have enabled students to draw the learning material into their personal life world. It appears that this may have facilitated personal growth, which is part of our endeavour to shape students into social workers.

Earlier we noted Mezirow's (1991, 2000) notions of a "disorientating dilemma" and "subjective reframing". It seems that, in this case, the e-journal enabled students to bring together and confront dissonances between their lived experience and the theory and skills learned in class, which may have facilitated transformational learning. The e-journal exemplars presented here illustrate how students often had to grapple with their lack of interest in HIV, their risky sexual behaviour, their role as men in the world, or their empowerment to regulate their sexual relations. This learning is both personal and academic, and suggests deep and integrative learning.

An unanticipated finding was the value that some students put on the interpersonal nature of the journal, even though a journal is primarily a monologue and not a dialogue. This is perhaps aligned with those studies that have found that a caring relationship between student and lecturer facilitates effective learning (Meyers, 2009). While well recognised in social work field instruction (Tsien & Tsui, 2007), the centrality of an authentic student-teacher relationship is perhaps not adequately appreciated in theory classes and is practically very difficult to achieve in increasingly larger classes. The e-journal enabled a rather intimate but structured relationship between learners and the lecturer. Some students wrote directly to the lecturer or addressed their journals to "Dear Diary." The journal perhaps allowed an intimate 'conversation' with a shadowy journal figure, which may not have been possible in an actual dialogue with another person. This is an area warranting further exploration.

Another area that we did not address here and that may deserve further attention is the use of an electronic journal rather than a handwritten journal. The advantages of the e-journal include the ability to monitor whether students complete the journals on a regular basis (rather than cramming them all in at the end of the course, which would undermine the learning aims) and to allow the lecturer to engage with the students throughout the life of the course. In addition, when appropriate, it allowed the lecturer to respond directly, immediately and confidentially with individual students who were going through difficulties. All of this may, however, have the unintended consequence of increasing students' experience of being observed and evaluated, making the journals overly self-conscious and perhaps eliciting social desirability effects. We are aware of research comparing electronic versus paper surveys (Booth-Kewley, Larson & Miyoshi, 2007), but not electronic versus paper journaling.

In the light of the results presented here, we are convinced that personal reflective e-journaling holds promise for social work educators, particularly in the delivery of theory modules where the integration of learning into the real world is often a challenge, particularly with larger classes that make experiential learning methods difficult. We have begun to explore the use of similar journals with very large classes (over 300 students) at first-year level, where we aim to develop rudimentary reflective skills. Ultimately, our goal as social work educators is to form social workers and not just teach our subject, and e-journaling appears to contribute to this formation.

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