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Reflective learning in higher education. A qualitative study on students' perceptions

Abstract

This article presents the results of a study aimed at determining the perceptions of students participating in reflective learning (RL) experiences at the University of Girona (Spain), specifically regarding the benefits and challenges of this methodology. Four focus groups were organized with students who had participated in RL experiences on four different undergraduate degree courses: nursing, environmental sciences, psychology and social education. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The study shows that students think RL contributes to a better understanding of themselves, their learning and their motivation to learn. Identified challenges were related primarily to understanding the aims of the experience, the degree of personal openness and the system of assessment. The study also provides some guidelines and orientation for improving experiences of undergraduate training based on reflective learning.

Keywords: Reflective learning, Undergraduates, Students' perceptions, Qualitative Research, Focus Groups

1. Introduction

The terms reflective learning and reflective practice have appeared with increasing regularity in the literature on higher education and adult education since the 1980s. Influenced by Dewey's (1933) ideas on reflective thinking and other relevant authors such as Schön (1983), many authors have explored these concepts in greater depth, leading to a rethinking of initial and continuous training for professionals, which in turn has resulted in concrete practices applying the reflective process to the construction of learning. Some of the most important contributions come from the field of adult education. Thus, Mezirow (1994) based his work on critical theory and transformation theory to propose models of reflective thinking, while other authors such as Boud and Walker (1998) and Jarvis (1987) have taken a more experiential approach. For Ryan (2013), reflection has been variously defined from different perspectives, but in broad terms she states that it includes two key elements: first, making sense of experience in

relation to oneself, others and contextual conditions, and second, reimagining and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefit.

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) prompted an in-depth review of university education curricula and methodologies. This has meant an increase in the number of studies and innovative experiences using new student-based approaches, with RL methodology and reflective practice receiving increasingly more attention in higher education (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Light, Cox and Calkins, 2009). There is a need to study which elements help to establish best practices for reflective teaching/learning, and students' perception is a key element in obtaining information on this issue.

In this article, we present a study aimed at providing data that contribute to a more in-depth analysis of university students' perception of the usefulness and difficulties they encounter when incorporating RL methodology into their learning, and ascertaining how they view this affecting their learning in experiences undertaken in university contexts. The study we present is based on four teaching experiences that employed RL methodology with undergraduate students of different subjects at the University of Girona (Spain): nursing, psychology, environmental sciences and social education. The aim was to determine students' perception regarding an approach to learning that is not common in our university context so as to provide guidelines to take into account when developing teaching experiences based on this methodology.

In the following section we review the literature on reflective learning and studies that have been conducted with the aim of determining students' perceptions of this methodology. This is followed by the presentation of our study and its results, and finally our conclusions.

2. Reflective learning at university. Students' views

The idea of reflective learning was developed from the second half of the twentieth century onwards and linked to theories of adult learning which, according to McMahon (1999) have in common the fact of recognizing that each person actively constructs meanings within an individual context determined by interpretations and on the basis of individual experiences. Undoubtedly, the work of Kolb (1984) had a considerable influence on the development of the idea that experience is a significant source of

knowledge. Kolb (1984) argues that learning is the creation of knowledge through the transformation of experience. He viewed learning as a dialectic and cyclical process, consisting of five processes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, theory and experimentation. Without reflection on experience there can be no learning.

Reflective learning (RL) is a process of reflecting on all sources of knowledge that can help to understand a situation, including personal sources and experience. RL is a learning model that breaks with the established orthodoxy based on the positivist understanding of knowledge, which has led to a rift between the subject and object of knowledge and underestimates the place of the self and of subjectivity in the process of constructing knowledge.

Despite the criticism it has received, referring mainly to the fact that it does not award enough value to the social and political context in which learning occurs and that experience is not always the first step to learning (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Smith, 2001), and that it does not take sufficient account of the skills and attitudes of reflection and deliberation necessary for learning and which themselves need to be learned (Jarvis, 1987; McMahon, 1999), Kolb's experiential learning model has influenced approaches to reflective practice and is today a basic reference in RL studies, probably due to it making some significant contributions with regard to how the teaching/learning process is approached in higher education.

Thus, drawing on works by authors such as Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and Osterman and Kottkamp (1993), we can state that the contributions of RL which are relevant to higher education are related to it being a student-centred learning model that awards importance to experience, both past and present, as an important basis for constructing theoretical knowledge and developing personal and professional skills. It emphasizes reflective thinking as a process for students to transform experience and create their own meanings. RL attributes an important role to the individual nature of the learning process, which involves emotions and feelings; that is, it gives importance to the self and subjectivity in the construction of knowledge, although we must not forget that the learning process is contextualized. It considers learning as a holistic process that includes cognitive and affective aspects and skills that work interdependently. RL involves seeing the everyday from a different

perspective than the norm and questioning it in light of the influences that social class, gender and ethnicity have on learning and on our assumptions and preconceptions. It views learning as a cyclical process that often starts from a problematic action, or when someone experiences a destabilizing situation they try to understand this action or experience, investigating it to try and understand which general underlying principles the situation has arisen from, leading them to move towards the field of theory, seeking alternatives and proposing a plan for action which they then execute, analyse and evaluate.

In short, the reflective learning model is an approach that can help to avoid overly technical teaching, excessively focused on procedures. This enables students to learn to cope with situations of uncertainty in their future professional practice, to resolve complex situations and not limit themselves to applying preconceived formulas or recipes and to develop a capacity for reflection that allows them to transform particular experiences into learning.

RL can be developed through various strategies such as reflective portfolios, mentoring processes, and incidental and anecdotal professional reflection (Tarrant, 2013). The reflective diary is another frequently used instrument accompanying professional practice experiences (Moon, 2006). Generally speaking, levels of reflection are assessed by means of narrative systems. This assessment is complex, however. For some authors (Bolton, 2001; Boud, 2001; Boud and Walker, 1998; Brockbank and McGill, 2008; English, 2001), there exists the controversy of writing to learn or writing to be assessed, which causes the student to consider the level of disclosure of their narrative, especially when it refers to actions in which they have participated, such as situations relating to their professional practice, for example. Another important and difficult issue is identifying levels of reflection and criteria for assessing reflection. Several authors propose models and criteria in respect of the latter (Black and Plowright, 2010; Harrison and Lee, 2011; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Kember et al, 2008; Ryan, 2013; Ryan and Ryan, 2013; Ward and McCotter, 2004).

We understand that a key element in assessing experiences and making proposals for improvement is the study of students' perceptions regarding how the methodology contributes to their learning. In the international context, different studies have focused on this subject, mostly in the field of medicine and the health sciences.

These studies used different methods to gather information about students perceptions, such as focus groups (Turner and Beddoes, 2007, Vivekananda-Schmidt et al, 2011), online interviews (Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997), interviews (Glaze, 2001; Roberts, 2009), questionnaires (Busch and Bissell, 2008; Langley and Brown, 2010; Schaub-de Jong et al, 2011, Stefani, Clarke and Littlejohn, 2000) and diaries (Williams and Wessel, 2004).

These studies show that students who have participated in RL experiences were able to develop a greater awareness of their learning and to be more critical (Turner and Beddoes, 2007), whilst it also allowed them to identify positive and improvable aspects of their own attitudes towards learning and the profession (Langley and Brown, 2010; Williams and Wessel, 2004), and increased their motivation towards learning and allowing them to be more creative (Turner and Beddoes, 2007). The studies also show that students recognize writing as an element that helps deepen understanding of those situations which provide the basis for reflection (Vivekananda-Schmidt et al., 2011) and consider reflective diary writing as an aid to better relate theory and practice, clarify the profession, develop coping skills for practical situations and provide a better understanding of new information (Langley and Brown, 2010).

On the other hand, the same studies also highlight some difficulties. For example, some students report that they have difficulty understanding the aims of the experience (Langley and Brown, 2010). In some studies, participants report having experienced discomfort at some point in the process due to either having to do a type of task they are not accustomed to or the demands of the learning and assessment activities. Turner and Beddoes (2007) highlight the novelty of students having to think about their beliefs and attitudes, while Bush and Bissell (2008) emphasize the complexity of exploring emotions. Several studies allude to the concern shown by students in doing writing activities, highlighting the tension between what should be public and what should remain private (Bush and Bissell, 2008; Glaze, 2001; Langley and Brown, 2010; Vivekananda-Schmidt et al., 2011). A potential problem with certain reflective-type tasks is highlighted as the lack of freedom of expression that participants may experience (Glaze, 2001). Finally, one concern frequently mentioned by students is a perceived lack of clarity in the evaluation process of experiences based on RL (Vivekananda-Schmidt et al., 2011).

The study presented below focuses on analysing the difficulties and possibilities of this approach to learning on undergraduate courses from the point of view of students who participated in four reflective learning experiences.

3. Context and aims of the study

The authors of the study are professors on different degree courses at the University of Girona, which has been a member of the Teaching Innovation Network on Reflective Learning since the academic year 2010-11. They implement the different RL experiences shown in Table 1.

Degree	Year	Nº students per group	Year RL began	Features of the experience
Nursing	3rd	70-80	2010/11	RL is the methodology used to accompain nursing internship. Students wrote a **reflective diary** to reflect on and learn from their experiences in the context of real-life practice. (Bulman and Schutz, 2008).
Psychology	1st	80	2009-10	RL methodology, developed through a reflective portfolio, was used to provide students with resources to address academic problems (time management, study strategies, etc.) and career guidance in relation to a better awareness of their skills and competences (Pérez Burriel, 2010, 2012).
Environmental sciences	1st and 2nd	80-100	2010-11	RL methodology was used as part of continuous assessment. Students work on scientific experiences by means of videos and demonstrations of experiments in class (Colomer et al., 2013). The assessment tool is a portfolio in which students reflect on the experiences individually throughout the course.
Social Education	2nd	60	2010-11	RL was used as a methodology to explore personal aspects that affect the professional practice of social educators. Reflective writing is the basic element used for constructing knowledge. The assessment tool is a portfolio in which students do various reflective writing activities (Pallisera et al. 2013).

Table 1: Description of the RL experiencies

The aim of the research presented below was to ascertain the perceptions of students participating in these experiences regarding the benefits and challenges of reflective learning methodology. The experiences were carried out over one academic year, which allowed students to have an overview of a full year of training based on RL. Students were contacted who had participated in experiences the previous year, so as to obtain viewpoints which were somewhat distanced in time, without the pressures or

tensions resulting from having to be assessed. On the basis of this information, some guidelines are formulated to be taken into account when developing teaching experiences using this methodology.

4. Method

The research adopted a qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions regarding RL methodology one year after participating in the experience. Our aim was to take an in-depth look at the benefits and difficulties students perceive when incorporating RL strategies into their learning and work dynamics. This information will help provide some guidelines for implementing good higher education practices based on reflective strategies.

The focus group technique was used. Focus groups are defined as carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment (Krueger, 2009). Research based on focus groups has traditionally been understood as a way of collecting qualitative data, involving a small group of people in one or more informal group discussions focused on a subject or series of specific themes (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2011). In our research, focus groups provide the ideal context for obtaining information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of RL and its usefulness, as well as other aspects students highlight in the narrative of their experience.

4.1. Participants

Four focus groups were formed to include students from the same degree subject (psychology, social education, nursing or environmental science). They had all participated in a previous reflective learning experience carried out during the 2011-12 academic year. All students who had participated in the experience were invited to join a focus group. Twenty students responded to the invitation. Table 2 summarizes the composition of the focus groups. It is generally held that focus groups should have between 6 and 12 participants, although they may be smaller when they have specialized knowledge and/or experience to discuss in the group (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2011).

The students received information regarding the aims of the study and signed an informed consent form which guaranteed anonymity of information and expressed their agreement to participate.

Degree course (2012-13)	Year	Participants			Date undertaken
		Code	Sex	Age	
Psychology	First	Psycho_1	Female	19	28/11/2012
		Psycho_2	Male	19	
		Psycho_3	Male	25	
		Psycho_4	Female	21	
		Psycho_5	Female	21	
Social education	Third	Educ_1	Female	21	6/03/2013
		Educ_2	Male	30	
		Educ_3	Female	22	
		Educ_4	Female	21	
		Educ_5	Female	21	
		Educ_6	Female	24	
Nursing		Nurs_1	Female	24	14/04/2013
		Nurs_2	Female	24	
		Nurs_3	Female	26	
Environmental science		EnvS_1	Male	19	20/06/2013
		EnvS_2	Female	19	
		EnvS_3	Female	21	
		EnvS_4	Female	20	
		EnvS_5	Female	19	
		EnvS_6	Male	20	

Table 2: Composition of focus groups

4.2. Procedure

A common script was prepared for the different focus groups and adapted according to the RL experience and dynamic of each group. The script was as follows:

1. The novelty of the educational experience they had participated in.
2. Aspects that either helped or hindered them in doing the activities.
3. The relationship between theory and practice.
4. The role of RL in improving their level of self-reflection and self-awareness as individuals and as future professionals.
5. The usefulness of RL in identifying strengths, weaknesses or gaps in their training.
6. The role of RL in improving how they learn and study.
7. The need for this type of work in their training as people and professionals.
8. Aspects they would highlight as positive or negative regarding the work done using this methodology.

Focus groups were conducted between eight months and one year of having completed the experience. Each focus group was conducted in a classroom in the respective Faculty and moderated by one of the professors with whom the students had undertaken the RL experience. Another professor from the research team acted as support. The duration of the focus group ranged from 65 to 75 minutes. Each session was recorded on video and audio. The full transcript was produced for each focus group.

4.3. Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed by combining structural and descriptive coding processes (Saldaña, 2013). We started with a list of codes defined according to our research aims. This was a "provisional coding" to establish an initial predetermined list of codes prior to fieldwork (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This initial list was linked to the script used for the focus groups. Thus, the phrases used as codes were based on the subject of the research (structural coding).

The members of the research team and a support assistant conducted two work sessions in which they produced a first coding of the transcripts using a provisional list

of codes. During this process new codes were added to the initial list. These new codes consisted of short sentences to summarize the main theme of a piece of data (descriptive coding). This led to a second list consisting of the initial codes plus those arising from the analysis. The support assistant used this list to encode the other three transcripts. The codes in this list were grouped into the following topics: (1) usefulness of the experience, (2) initial problems and difficulties, (3) novelty of the experience, (4) RL and the relationship between theory and practice, (5) the RL experience as a tool for reflection, (6) the role of tutorials, and (7) the role of small group work.

Once all transcripts had been provisionally encoded, they were returned to the professors responsible for each group, along with the list of codes, in order to review the coding and incorporate any changes deemed appropriate. This review led to the final encoding of transcripts. The encoded fragments were classified according to each code, maintaining the reference to the group where the fragment originated. This classification allowed a cross analysis of the data.

Table 3 contains the main codes used to classify information in relation to two topics: the usefulness of the RL experience (Topic 1) and the main difficulties or problems perceived by students (Topic 2). An analysis of these two topics is presented in this article.

Following the above procedure, a content analysis was performed. In line with that proposed by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2011), the frequencies of each code were counted by number of participants and combined with a qualitative analysis of each code. The frequency count allowed us to identify which ideas were more relevant within each focus group and to all participants as a whole; the qualitative analysis allowed us to determine their reflections on each topic.

Analysis of the information classified in each code allowed us to identify the following analytical categories for Topics 1 and 2. For Topic 1, "Usefulness of the RL experience", the categories identified were:

a) The usefulness of self-reflection as a tool for knowing yourself and your own learning.
b) The usefulness of RL in raising awareness of your own learning.

Topic	Main codes
1. Usefulness of the RL experience	1A Usefulness of the experience in relation to learning
	1B Usefulness of the experience in relation to self-awareness
	1C Long-term usefulness of the methodology/experience
2. Initial problems and difficulties with RL	2A Discomfort, attack on privacy
	2B Difficulty assimilating and understanding aims
	2C Uncertainty
	2D Difficulties with the written narrative
	2E Concerns regarding RL assessment
	2F Difficulties self-regulating time

Table 3: Codes used to analyse focus group transcripts (Topics 1 and 2)

c) The importance of written expression as a strategy for improving the learning process.

d) The impact of RL on the learning process: contributions, changes and improvements.

e) Usefulness of the RL experience for exercising the profession in the future.

For Topic 2, "Initial problems and difficulties with RL", the analytical categories were:

a) Difficulties assimilating and understanding the aims pursued by the methodology.

b) Difficulties associated with the use of reflective writing.

c) Doubts regarding the degree of personal openness required.

d) Concern regarding how they are to be assessed.

5. Results

The results are presented in the two sections below. The first includes results relating to the usefulness of RL perceived by students and the second difficulties identified in applying the methodology.

5.1. Usefulness of RL experiences in relation to your learning

Firstly, students agreed in highlighting **the usefulness of self-reflection as a tool for both knowing themselves and enhancing their learning**. Specifically, 15 of the 20 students (5 Psycho, 4 Educ, all 3 from Nurs and 3 EnvS) emphasized that the experience made them *reflect on their own competences* and those needed to become a professional: 'What I would say is that the portfolio (which is the experience they identify as RL), (...), helps us to know ourselves and to realize what abilities, competences, we have.' (Psycho_2)

It also helped to establish priorities, to *internalize what you learn and relate it to situations of professional practice*: 'I believe that the module has been a tool which has helped me learn to...apply assertiveness, empathy...with people you are doing the work experience with.' (Educ_3)

These experiences also led to students having to *reflect personally on their experiences, on their own educational pathway*, *their feelings and emotions*, especially in relation to professional activities.

> '...and what I remember most about doing the portfolio is having to reflect on my experience, the jobs I've done in my life. And also at the same time about why I chose this career and the competences and abilities needed, which I had never stopped to think about in that way.' (Psycho_3)

One of the ideas on which there was most agreement among students who participated in the focus groups was that RL experiences **helped them to become aware of their own learning**. This sentiment appeared in all of the groups (3 from Psycho, Edu and Nurs, and 4 from EnvS). In-depth reflection helped them to identify positive and negative aspects of themselves in relation to learning and their learning processes. It helped reflect on what they already knew and relate learning to real-life experiences:

> '(Keeping a reflective diary) allowed me to reason or reflect on a number of situations that perhaps I was able to analyse or see, but not in any detail or depth, or to integrate with all the concepts taught in class and allow this integration' (Nurs_3)

Another topic that appeared in all the focus groups was the fact that RL experiences led to **changes in how to address learning**. Ten students mentioned this issue, even if the changes they referred to differ slightly. Thus, four students stated that

the experience helped them *to relate concepts to ideas*: '…it is then that you can relate what you are doing and relate concepts from other areas. Not only related to the weather, but you can relate it to society.' (EnvS_6)

Some commented that RL methodology allowed them *to increase their autonomy* (3 students):

'With this, class notes are not enough. It's made me search in books, ask the professor and generally look for things myself, which was not necessary in other subjects. And in this case the subject has helped me to move forward and be more active' (EnvS_1)

The comment was made that RL *promotes reasoning* and the questioning of prior knowledge, pushing them to ask themselves questions (2 students). Others said that RL experiences also influenced their *motivation to learn* (6 students).

There was a lot of agreement in considering the **importance of writing as a strategy for improving the learning process**. Ten participants specifically referred to this topic (3 Psycho, 3 Educ, 2 Nurs and 2 EnvS). Students saw various advantages in putting ideas in writing. Firstly, writing helps organize and relate ideas, prioritize important issues and analyse different situations:

'And the act of writing – rather than just resolving problems – the act of developing a written text where you put it all down…helps you look in many different places to try to relate everything together. When you finish, you understand it and you've done it yourself.' (EnvS_3)

As well as being a process, writing also involves being able to find information that can be used later:

'Well I, from the beginning, every time I go to do work experience I re-read my reflective diaries from before, in case a similar situation happens to me and to see how I felt. And because I've written a narrative of this situation, I've written the pros and cons, how I felt, how I would like to have felt…Then I can change this new situation, right? It's like self-help.' (Nurs_1)

Another aspect they pointed out was the **usefulness of RL experiences for exercising the profession in the future**. The issue came up in all groups and 12 students commented on it. The fact that the experiences encourage reflection on personal and professional aspects means that students perceived the work they did as having value beyond the limits of academic activity:

'I think it is very useful because there is a lot of contact with the person. We work with people, so it is also important to know yourself and how you will react in the face of something and also know how others will react…the people you're working with. And, well, I think this is very useful'. (Educ_5)

5.2. Perceived difficulties in RL experiences

With regard to difficulties, students said that at the beginning of the experience they had certain **difficulties assimilating and understanding the objectives pursued by RL methodology**. Specifically, 14 of the students addressed this issue (5 Psycho, 4 Edu, 3 Nurs and 2 EnvS): '...I remember the beginning was very hard. And I thought: why is that? I can't see its usefulness. But then afterwards…when we did the reviews, then I did, but not at first.' (Psycho_5)

In some cases, this situation resulted in uncertainty or doubts when responding to the proposed learning activities (whether the reflective diary, in the case of nursing students, or the portfolio in the experiences of psychology and social education students, or open questions in the case of environmental science students).

Ten students (5 Psycho, 2 Educ, 3 Nurs) said they had difficulties relating to tasks involving the use of reflective writing. These difficulties were, on the one hand, the novelty of having to put in writing personal situations in which emotions and thoughts are very much related:

'Not knowing how to write down my thoughts. It's the biggest challenge I found. (...) I found it difficult to convey what I really felt. Find the right words…when you reflect and want to convey what you think, what you feel, what you would change…I really found that very difficult.' (Nurs_2)

On the other hand, in the case of nursing, where the activity involved writing a reflective diary based on work experience, students reported difficulties in choosing appropriate situations to write about. The fact of evaluating professional activities in which other professionals are involved conditioned the reflective narrative:

'There comes a point where you think: I have made this reflection, I've had that experience, but maybe if I phrase it like that it will reflect badly on the hospital, the institution, the person I was with…of course, you get to a point where you're not sure what to do.' (Nurs_3)

In three of the experiences (psychology, nursing and social education), students were asked for a level of reflection that requires a certain level of personal openness. In these focus groups participants expressed difficulties in determining the degree of openness necessary (specifically, 12 of the 14 participants in these focus groups): '…you can get to thinking at the beginning: who will see this? What opinion will my professor have of me? What will he or she think of me?...' (Educ 2)

Some of the students - 9 to be precise (2 Psycho, 3 Educ, 3 Nurs and 1 EnvS) - expressed a general **concern with assessment**:

> 'Because it's a subjective thing, something to do with me, I mean…if I've experienced it in this particular way, why does a third person have to evaluate me, or what criteria are they going to evaluate me with?' (Nurs_3)

6. Discussion

Our study is unique in that it has involved the analysis of four educational experiences in RL methodology on four different degree courses. The results show that there are a number of considerations regarding the contribution of this methodology and the difficulties it involves that are quite independent of the specific experience in which students participated and which largely agree with the results of other studies reporting on RL experiences carried out in other areas.

The perception of the students who participated in our research was markedly positive in all four focus groups. There is consensus in viewing RL as a methodology that improves learning. The research results indicate that this approach notably contributes to raising students' awareness of their own learning, and identifying both positive and improvable aspects of their abilities in and attitudes towards learning. This reflection on their own learning seems, therefore, to be an important aspect and is one that is also highlighted in research by Langley and Brown (2010), Turner and Beddoes (2007) and Williams and Wessel (2004). The results also indicate that this awareness does not occur only in relation to learning itself but goes further to also contribute to increasing self-knowledge and one's own competences and abilities. The contribution of RL to increasing motivation for learning also appears in our and others' research (Turner and Beddoes, 2007). However, it is not clear to what extent this reflection leads to greater self-regulation, an aspect that has been studied in more depth by other authors

(Portillo et al., 2013). That is, students in our research point out that RL has helped them become aware of learning processes, but do not clearly state that it has led to the identification of gaps in their learning, or thinking up actions to improve their present forms of learning.

Students' viewpoints confirm the positive aspects of narrative strategies. In line with the findings of Vivekakanda-Schmidt et al. (2011), narration helps to deepen understanding and increase involvement in learning tasks and situations. The usefulness of reflective narration in promoting reflective learning is highlighted by authors such as Bolton (2010) and Boud (2001), among others. Our study emphasizes the fact that its use in different areas of academic knowledge is similarly valued by students.

With regard to difficulties, the participants in our study displayed some confusion regarding how to approach the various learning activities. As with the study conducted by Langley and Brown (2010), students did not find it easy to understand the aims of experiences following this methodology. In addition, they found it surprising that some learning tasks involved thinking about their own experiences and attitudes, as also noted by Turner and Beddoes (2007). This demonstrates how this kind of work is uncommon and that students are rarely asked to reflect on their own experience, even though, as Boud, Cohen and Walker stated (1993), past and present experience is potentially relevant to any learning task. These results show that higher education still tends to prioritize the procedural and cognitive aspects of learning, leaving to one side emotional aspects, which also form part of the experience.

Students had difficulties in identifying both the degree of openness to use in their writing and where the boundary lies between public and private, concerns which also appear in the research by Bush and Bissell (2008), Langley and Brown (2010) and Vivekananda-Schmidt et al. (2011). There is fairly general agreement in the literature that writing a diary, for example, can help students to develop or improve reflective skills (Gursansky et al, 2010). However, some authors do not advocate the use of diaries as an assessment tool (Boud and Walker, 1998). If the reflective process is understood to be open and personal, knowing that the professor will read the narrative can inhibit some students in writing about aspects they perceive, or make them think they are too personal or might harm the outcome of their assessment. Our study is no different from others (Vivekananda-Schmidt et al, 2011), in that assessment generates concerns among

participants, who ask themselves how they will be evaluated, especially when RL is linked to experiences of professional practices or processes of personal and professional development.

7. Conclusions

The fact that students feel the RL experience they have participated in is useful for exercising their future profession as nurses, psychologists, social workers or environmentalists suggests that RL methodology has significant potential for linking academic activity with professional action. The reflection inherent in this methodology allows learning to take place which students perceive to be essential to the construction of their professional pathway. This result suggests that RL allows students to create their own meanings. Reflection is enhanced by reflective narration. Techniques like the reflective diary applied to practical work situations help to improve the relationship between theory and practice and understanding the professional field.

From our analysis of the difficulties experienced by students across all four groups, we can draw up some working proposals to help improve experiences based on RL.

On one hand, the study reveals the need to invest effort in showing students how to use RL methodology during each experience. It requires that professors clarify their goals at different times throughout the process, so as to help the students understand and assimilate the type of work assigned and the learning objective. Professors need to provide students with adequate information in order that they understand the relationship between the methodology and the training objectives of the course, and sufficiently justify the relationship between this methodology and the professional skills they are expected to acquire.

Part of the insecurity students perceive is due to the novelty of the methodology and doubts regarding how their reflections will be assessed. This requires establishing a working system that provides students with security and allows adjustments of the curricular objectives, to provide both clear guidelines when setting assignments for students, and clear assessment criteria.

On the other hand, the study demonstrates the need to provide students with support for tackling tasks related to the use of reflective writing. This type of

methodology requires that professors make a considerable effort to create a framework of trust (Bolton, 2001; Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Dempsey et al, 2001); Harrison, 2009). To build a group climate based on mutual trust it is important to work with groups of students that are not too large and set up parallel spaces for working in groups so as to contribute to the creation of positive links that provide students with security in doing their reflective work. Tutorials for individuals or in small groups can be a space where students compare their narratives and explain the difficulties they encounter in performing various tasks, and can therefore constitute a suitable space for helping students better organize their work and undertake their own actions for improvement.

Our study has limitations related to the fact that RL requires a global approach and here we have focused on students' perception as a means of analysing the experiences undertaken. An in-depth analysis of the processes of RL would require a multidimensional approach that includes, among other factors, the particular features of each of the experiences that have formed part of our study. Although the study does allow us to identify general perceptions, it does not allow a detailed analysis of specific issues related to the level of reflection of students participating in the focus groups. The authors of the article are currently developing an instrument to establish students' level of RL in order to further analyse the teaching processes developed via this methodology.

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