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Learning Reflective Practice Skills with the Use of Narrative Techniques

Abstract

The article is meant to address the importance of drawing attention to learning reflective practice skills for personal and social development, particularly a learner's development. The use of narrative techniques in the process of learning can prove to be beneficial for its participants. That is why their importance in pedagogical purposes is emphasized in the material analyzed herein. These techniques implemented in didactic practice and childrearing can also be treated as techniques of gathering data in the qualitative research that is the author's area of interest.

Keywords: learner, learning, learner's reflective practice, narration, narrative techniques

Introduction

The issue addressed in this article is the to elicit of the meaning of narrative techniques, particularly when applied to education. This seems

crucial nowadays, as the constantly changing trends in social and cultural domains have some impact on the human approach to life, which cannot be indifferent to the pedagogical and didactic dimensions of schools functioning in society. These dimensions interfere with each other and face many challenges. They must be coped with by both teachers and learners, and they become an object of reflection which may lead to solutions to many problems brought by them.

Not surprisingly, teachers and learners require the significant care that should take place in a reflective, warm-hearted, friendly, educative atmosphere that fosters the processes of teaching and learning. Such an atmosphere can help teachers and their students keep healthy, beneficial, creative relationships that enable them to achieve their educational goals. This requires time and quiet (Nalaskowski, 2017, pp. 245–246). Without these factors, the knowledge obtained in the process of learning can be shaped in an instrumental, declarative way that serves the standardization goals. Such a situation can raise many questions about the future of the individuals and of whole societies that develop thanks to educational progress. It often becomes reflected in discourse and discussions conveyed between teachers, students, parents, and academics, who refer them to various aspects of a particular school policy. However, these discussions do not always yield the expected results. Often, they seem to reach a theoretical, broader point, which must be overcome thanks to the skills of reflective practice.

Thus, in this light, the aspect of learning the skills of reflective practice which this article briefly touches on can be justified. The problem posed by the author can be expressed in the form of a query: “How important is it to use narrative techniques in learning reflective practice?” The answer to this question requires an analysis of such notions as learning and the learning of reflective practice in relation to the use of selected narrative techniques as regards qualitative research. These techniques of narration will only be summarized, as they have been described by the author in other publications. Thus, the data gathered with their use can induce some implications which are crucial to their deployment in everyday school subjects, regardless of their nature.

Learning in a nutshell

Depicting the theoretical aspect of learning reflective practice requires us to focus, first of all, on the term “learning,” and then on the reflective skills which the learner should learn, develop, and master. It will be shown in the perspective of personalistic pedagogy, which treats a person as an integral entity that forms in the process of integral development, embracing the development of the physical, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual layers aligning tightly with each other in an interactive relationship (Kunowski, 2000, pp. 194–203; Szymańska, 2019, pp. 66–88). This theoretical, personalistic perspective leads to an understanding of the process of learning as an interactive phenomenon that allows the person to gain more complex, molded skills of self-cognition, cognition of other people, of the world, and of God. Such an approach to learning can be fundamental for the learner in developing and mastering skills of reflective practice. Thus, the next aspect of the analysis should concentrate on the meaning of these skills in the process of a person becoming a more mature individual living with and among others.

The term “learning” can be defined as the personal, unique disposition that enables the learner to make progress in the integral development, perceived from a pedagogical/anthropological/ethical perspective. This means that learning has a tremendous impact on the formation of the developmental layers mentioned above. This relationship between learning and integral development can have a reciprocal, hermeneutic feature, as the content learned so far (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) should foster the trajectory of further learning. Franciszek Bereźnicki defines learning as a process of acquiring the knowledge of the world, skills, and habits. According to Bereźnicki, if this process runs appropriately and successfully, it results in the creation of new forms of behavior and activity or in modifying the old ones (2011, pp. 17–18). Theresa Ebiere Dorgu states that “learning has been defined in various ways based on various theories explaining the process of learning. Learning involves changes in the behavior patterns of an individual. Simply put, learning is the process of acquiring knowledge or skills and attitudes” (2016, p. 79). In addition to the

individual aspect of learning, it is necessary to show its social dimension as well. Hence, learning is also seen as a social process, allowing the human to adapt to their wider environment, thanks to many factors, among which experience cannot be ignored. David and Alice Kolb state that

the process of learning from experience is ubiquitous, present in human activity everywhere all the time. The holistic nature of the learning process means that it operates at all levels of human society from the individual, to the group, to organizations, and to society as a whole. (2008)

In their point of view, learning is also “re-learning”, and “the process of creating knowledge”. It refers not only to experience, but to observation, reflection, thinking, and acting (2008). Kolb and Yeganeh claim that

learning can have magical transformative powers. It opens new doors and pathways, expanding our world and capabilities. It literally can change who we are by creating new professional and personal identities. Learning is intrinsically rewarding and empowering, bringing new avenues of experience and new realms of mastery It involves a deep trust in one’s own experience and a healthy skepticism about received knowledge. It requires the perspective of quiet reflection and a passionate commitment to action in the face of uncertainty. The learning way is not the easiest way to approach life, but in the long run it is the wisest. (2011, p. 3)

Learning requires responsible, wise exploration and expansion. Focusing on the aspect of expansive learning, one must mention the seven actions suggested by Yrjö Engeström (2011): questioning; searching for explanatory mechanisms and causes with historical/genetic and empirical analysis; building a model that exploits the new concept with an explanation of the solutions to the problems; constructively testing this model in the practical operative field; deploying it in an expansive way

according to the constructive concept; and reflecting on and evaluating the process of learning by consolidating its outcomes and deploying them in a practice that takes a new form.

It is worth mentioning here that reflective learning seems to be determined by the quality of reflection carried out by action, in action, and on action, which will be depicted while describing the learner's reflective practice. Evoking these definitions of learning brings to the mind the notion of transformative learning, which should also be mentioned. This kind of learning, according to Jack Mezirow,

is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, and mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (2003, pp. 58–59)

The professional guidance of action can be tied in with the understanding of some principles of actions fitted to expansive learning, and bringing out the meaning of communicative learning aligned with communicative activity (Mezirow, 2003, p. 59) in the domain of teacher and learner formative education (Szymańska, 2019). Therefore, it can be assumed that learning, perceived both as an individual disposition and as the process seen from an individual and a social perspective, has a profound meaning in the building of a mature, creative personality and society. From the point of view of personalistic pedagogy, the competent care of these two dimensions (individual and social) of learning should lead to developing and mastering of the following: language competences, including narrative skills; interests; passions; curiosity; control and regulation of the emotions; logical, dialectic, creative, and critical thinking; imagination; moral character; inner and outer integration; the performance of social roles; social and cultural identity; spirituality, etc. (Szymańska, 2017).

Having considered all the aspects of learning in terms of the material already discussed, mature learning can be defined as a life-long, intrinsic, holistic, dynamic, reflective, expansive, exploring, communicative, transformative, and creative process that fosters a person's integral development by imparting a new, higher quality of identity. To make learning more mature, effective, and successful, the following principles can be suggested to teachers and educators:

- respect learners and their experience
- build a creative atmosphere
- create a reflective space for learning, particularly a divergent one that requires time and quiet to "produce" fruitful feelings and creative thinking;
- make space for learning through guided action and communication
- stimulate and cultivate learners' interests and passions
- challenge learners' ability in overcoming their mental, affective, moral, and social limitations, difficulties, and barriers
- build a space for learners to take responsibility for the results of their learning
- assist learners passively and actively in the process of learning
- show learners that they are the desired subjects of education

Learning skills of reflective practice

Observing the principles of learning rooted in personalistic pedagogy, one can state that the learner should become a reflective practitioner who understands the meaning of reflection, which has to be taught and learned (Spalding & Wilson 2002). The range of definitions for reflection is wide. Apart from those offered by John Dewey (1933, p. 9), Patricia L. Williams (1998, p. 31), David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker (1985, p. 19), Luke Mathieson (2016), and Donald A. Schön (1995), Joy Amulya's definition is worth mentioning:

Reflection is an active process of witnessing one's own experience in order to take a closer look at it, sometimes to direct attention to it briefly, but often to explore it in greater depth. This can be done in the midst of an activity or as an activity in itself. The key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one's own actions and experience—in other words, to examine that experience rather than just living it. (2011)

Therefore, learning has an impact on the quality of outcomes that derive from reflecting on the knowledge provided by formal or informal sources (Schön, 1991; 1995). The analysis of the different terms of reflection in the personalistic perspective led me to make an attempt to build a definition for reflection:

Reflection is the inner, active, dynamic process covering the whole integrated (biologically, psychologically, socially, culturally, and spiritually) person revealing its quality in a particular act that arises from concrete experience taking place in a concrete period of time and the knowledge obtained either consciously or unconsciously that needs to be formed in order to achieve the personal and social growth. It is determined anthropologically, morally, axiologically, and psychologically. (Szymańska, 2017, p. 30)

It is worth emphasizing that reflection should be shaped in three dimensions: by action, in action and on action. Thus, these dimensions need to be presented briefly as well. The first one refers to the theoretical domain of the declarative and procedural knowledge items that become the objectives of the concrete questions directed first of all, to various *self*-facing inner and outer situations that require a moral judgment of truth. The answers given to questions posed to oneself should lead to reflection in action, connected with the knowledge in action “revealed in and by actual designing” (Schön, 1991). Here, the reflective questions that the *self* poses come from the experience and knowledge

gained while implementing the designed ones. They draw the learner's attention to the past and the future in order to improve the quality of their own approach to aspects learned so far, seen from the intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives. As far as reflection on action is concerned, the self-assessment of the knowledge obtained from formal and informal experience should be drawn from the questions, deepening the process of scientific curiosity, building new levels of conscience, and leading to new quality of identity. However, it demands constant work to master reflective practice. Christopher Day claims that

without routinely engaging in reflective practice, it is unlikely that we will be able to understand the effects of our motivations, prejudices, and aspirations upon the ways in which we create, manage, receive, sift, and evaluate knowledge; and as importantly, the ways in which we are influencing the lives, directions, and achievements of those whom we nurture and teach. (1999, p. 229)

Hence, both teachers and learners can benefit from practicing reflection and developing and modeling reflexive skills (Spalding & Wilson, 2002, pp. 1393–1421). Designing a good practice of reflection seems to be very demanding, as reflective practice

means both clarifying the purposes it needs to serve and identifying opportunities to locate reflection in our work that are realistic and yet occur at the right intervals and with sufficient depth to be meaningful. Maintaining a practice of reflection, however it is structured, transforms the possibility of learning from our work into a reality. (Amuyla, 2011)

In this context, developing and mastering reflective skills seems to be crucial for the trajectory of teaching and learning. Joseph A. Raelin defines five skills of reflection: being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing (2002, p. 66).

The first one can be seen as the creative opening skill, enabling vertical and horizontal cognition of oneself, others, the world, and God. The queries have a metaphysical, existential nature. They approach the area of meta-knowledge in declarative and procedural dimensions, e.g., What do I know about the knowledge of self in the aspect of morality? How can I use this knowledge to help others, to build a warm community?

The second skill of reflection

seeks to articulate a collective voice from within ourselves. In speaking, we attempt to characterize the state of the group or its meaning at a given time. It may entail summoning an image to articulate meaning, suggesting group norms, or bringing out uncertainties or unfounded assumptions. In speaking, it is not necessary to prepare words in advance. We craft our message in the moment as the meaning unfolds. (Raelin, 2002, pp. 72–73)

The queries posed by a learner should be oriented towards conveying a dialogue seen as an art of communication with oneself, others, the world, and God: How I know my dialogue partner? Do I respect him/her? How should I conduct the narrative with him/her? How do I react to my opponents? Is the dialogue creative and beneficial for both subjects?

Reflective analysis of the practical domain of these two skills can lead to the development and mastering of the third skill. J. Raelin claims

we stay within ourselves and, at the same time, share our doubts or voice our passion. By disclosing, we may unveil feelings at a given moment based on what has transpired, or we may present a story to reveal the depth of our experience. As people disclose more about themselves, the group learns more about its membership. Another cue to promote disclosing is to ask myself what I might say to help the group know me better. (2002, 73)

The disclosing skill can be learned in a warm, educative atmosphere conducive to conveying a fruitful dialogue, discussion, discourse.

The speakers should be prepared to share their own inner experience, feelings, thoughts, or interests with others. All these things disclosed in a positive manner also become the object of reflection and meta-reflection, bearing such questions as: What do I really think about the matters discussed? What do I know about those who are around me? How can I and they benefit from this disclosure? This skill indicates the progress of the process of learning which heads towards obtaining the maturity of the next skill—testing.

Hence, this fourth reflective skill

is an open-ended query directed toward the group as a whole that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. When testing, we may ask the group to consider its own process or may attempt to explore underlying assumptions previously taken for granted. In testing, we are trying to promote a process of collective inquiry. (Raelin, 2002, p. 73)

This skill refers to the previous experiences, the conclusions that stem from them, etc. It can evoke either disappointment or satisfaction that may foster another step of creative thinking. The queries can go deeper in the direction of needing to face one's old beliefs, values, or attitudes in the search for the truth about oneself, others, and the world: How do I seek the truth in other people's attitudes to life? How subjective is my analysis of matters, events which occurred to me and othe The questions and feedback given to them implies the need to probe—the next reflective skill.

As the fifth reflective skill, probing requires a person, on the one hand,

to be careful not to interrogate or make any member feel he or she has been put on the spot or on the defensive. On the other hand, probing may initially make some members uncomfortable if they are asked to consider assumptions that had been hidden even from their own consciousness. (Raelin, 2002, pp. 73–74)

It can evoke such questions as: Where do my experience and reflection go? How do I try to change my old habits, behavior, feelings, thoughts, or motivation to be a better person? How do I help others to discover various areas of reflection? What do I do to master my personal and professional life in terms of the integrity of my being?

Learning the reflective skills briefly described above can foster one's personal and social development, since they refer to oneself, others, the world, and God in a critical and creative approach. They should be taught and learned at every level of education in a manner appropriate to the student's stage of development. However, their practice requires time, a learning space, and an appropriate selection of content, which reduces the standardization of educational practices in favor of providing the teachers and learners with wider opportunities for creativity, and respecting certain principles. According to Bruner, these principles comprise, for example, the perspective and interpretative aspect of education; the aspect of overcoming the constraints of human minds by building a symbolic attitude towards education; a constructivist cultural approach to the process of transforming one's outer and inner circumstances mastering the inter-subjectivity gift that helps in developing the mental, cultural interactivity with oneself, others, and the world; the ability to externalize and produce artifacts that evoke the development of creativity; the aspect of forming the identity and sense of the value of self; and the need to implement narrative into school practice (Bruner, 2006, pp. 29–63).

All in all, learning reflective practice can be seen as a challenge when managing the processes of contemporary education, where reflective practice should find its place. Research published by Muir et al. seem to advocate this statement. They write that

reflection on work-based practices enabled the acquisition of new knowledge by reviewing and learning from experience, arising from action and problem-solving, within a working environment. The learning is centered round live projects and challenges to individuals and organizations. The creation of knowledge,

as a shared and collective activity, is one in which people discuss ideas and share problems and solutions. (Muir et al., 2014, p. 29)

Therefore, creating the learning and teaching spaces and deploying appropriate didactic methods and techniques which foster the development of reflective practice skills should be understood as a good investment in human and social development. When I ask teachers how they teach reflective practice to their students, they acknowledge that although they use the notions of reflection, they do not focus on skills of reflective practice. Moreover, they often understand it as synonym for consideration. Apart from that, having inadequate time to complete the curriculum, they mainly focus on the instrumental knowledge which is required to prepare the students for their exams. In this light, the reflection upon meta-knowledge and meta-strategies appears pointless. Such a situation evokes a paradox. On the one hand, some are committed to the idea of achieving "tough," "pure," and concrete teaching and learning goals, while on the other hand, they expect moral/axiological progress in the students' personal and social development which should take place in the educational process. Here, the question about the educational (didactic and upbringing) goals and ways of achieving them can induce the need for a constructive change in the area of education that should go towards formative didactics. One of the factors fostering this change is hidden in the potential of appropriately used narrative techniques in any subjects.

The use of selected narrative techniques to foster the development of learners' reflective practice skills

Taking into consideration the meaning of narrative in building one's personal, social, and cultural identity (Bruner, 2006, pp. 63–67), I can claim that either neglecting or reducing the possibilities for competently implementing narrative techniques in the area of education should be objectionable. Among them are some which are connected with structural learning, such as journal of reflection, metaphorical stories, reflective

essays, digressive/reflective essays, and comparative/reflective essays (Szymańska 2017, pp. 143–163, 260–274; Ciechowska, Kuztal, Szymańska, 2019, pp. 182–184). These techniques have a formative dimension. They are structured in such a way that enables in-depth wandering across the inner personal and social areas. The learner, who observes their structural forms, can avoid the mental chaos and seek qualitative, creative problem-solving and implement the results into their personal and social life. They can be used not only for educational goals, but also for scientific research, as they gather data which are the source of experiences and reflections upon the issues assigned. These techniques can foster the learner's cognitive/humanistic approach and raise their human maturity within integral development processes. They can direct the meaning of experience and knowledge towards the formation of their attitudes to the self, others, the world, and God, which results in a transformation of their mentality, feelings, motivation, beliefs, or expectations. However, the use of these techniques demands some “technical” rules to be applied:

- sticking to the issue that evoked the reflection
- conducting the reflection in a spiral
- conveying and deepening the reflection on the formative stages: either personal, pedagogical, or professional (didactic), or personal and social for the pupils
- deploying the idea of reflecting according to the goals that are assigned by the five reflective skills described earlier)
- implementing the “cultural matrix” for carrying out the reflection, for example, a film, a piece of writing, etc. that can be used on purpose or freely
- introducing the maximum of integration into the students' way of conducting the reflection
- encouraging the students to create their own artifacts (poems and the like) if possible, regardless of the subjects being taught and learned—in this way the results of reflection can be positively reinforced and translated into progress in teaching and learning

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- providing a warm, creative atmosphere which fosters the reflection in time and space

According to my own qualitative narrative research, the application of these techniques to action research or autoethnography became precious sources of data which enabled the participants to rediscover what “plays in their souls,” their interests and hobbies. They drew attention to the strengths and weaknesses of their personal and social lives. They evoked and deepened their constructive critical thinking about their knowledge and the meta-knowledge of merits, drawbacks, and obstacles to be overcome. Moreover, the data reflected the participants’ crucial needs and values in the process of building their new qualitative identity. These data also made me think of the pupils attending primary and secondary school. The use of narrative techniques could develop and extend their cognitive creative skills. They could help them reveal their talents and problems to be solved, making them more sensitive and critical. At the same time, it could help them find their path in life, constrain the negative impact of mass media, develop their communicative skills, open them up to higher culture outcomes, and appreciate traditions. Therefore, the deployment of narrative techniques can also foster the development and mastering of the skills of reflective practice, which help the learner build and expand the space of being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing, on the condition that they have enough time to reflect upon the valuable content acquired through the educational process. Reflection, deepened with the use of narrative techniques, also enables the learner (pupil) to assess their own progress and growth (Marek, 2017, p. 43) in their own integral development. It is crucial to remember the three factors—silence, “time, and thorough exploration” (Denton, 2009)—which perform an important role in it.

I could conduct the research for some years owing to the implementation of my own concept of the portfolio project on reflection stimulating personal and professional teacher development. I acknowledge my original method of portfolio not only as a method in teacher formative education, but also as a narrative method of data collection.

Conclusion

To conclude, the material presented above briefly outlines the meaning of learning and reflection, seen as deep inner and outer processes forming one's personal and social environment being tightly aligned with each other. These processes should become an object of reflection in their participants' perspective of integral development, which implies the need to change one's view on some aspects of education, such as the expected knowledge, skills, and approaches which the learner should achieve. In light of the many negative situations and events taking place in the world at the local, regional, national, and international levels, the directions of contemporary education do not seem effective enough. In the world of deploying the rigid, highly standardized education into life, there is little space for reflective learning and teaching, although reflection is seen as a tool that aids in the mastering of advanced practice of education and the meta-cognitive process of learning (Williams, 1998, p. 31; Mathieson, 2016, p. 1). However, the reality is that the implementation of reflective/transformational concepts in the pedagogical and didactic art seems remote. Therefore, the formative education emerging from these concepts appears as a utopia, leaving the reflective question "Why?" open to those who take responsibility for the qualitative existence of future generations.

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