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# Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...Through Storytelling to Reflexivity

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**Abstract:** This paper presents findings of a study designed and carried out to address the needs to develop undergraduate students' reflexivity skills. In qualitative research reflexivity ensures rigor, quality and trustworthiness of the research. In addition, the emergence of a reflective paradigm in higher education in the last two decades encourage self-review as well as convey practice realities. The ability to critically reflect has been identified as a crucial part of employability. With the aim to address the above needs a learning assignment was designed and incorporated into one semester International Business Communication course taught to undergraduate international business students. The storytelling assignment's direct aim was to develop reflexivity, both as a qualitative research skill and as a professional skill. The methodology adopted narrative analysis, with qualitative interpretation approach. The data was generated by reflective narratives created by the students. The findings of the analysis showed that the students identified reflexivity as a new concept. The concept was defined as necessary and helpful in self-development. Additionally, the reflexive narratives not only demonstrated levels of deep reflection, but also identified additional learning benefits: discovering own creative potential, strengthening confidence when dealing with unexpected and challenging situations, enhanced openness towards the immediate environment, improved understanding of otherness, and self. The above skills were identified as applicable in business and research practices. It can therefore be concluded that storytelling can be recommended as an effective tool in learning reflexivity, and qualitative research skills.

**Keywords:** qualitative research, reflexivity, storytelling, narrative analysis

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## 1. Introduction

In qualitative research reflexivity is considered one of the ways qualitative researchers should ensure rigor and quality in their work; it is also a vital part of ensuring trustworthiness (Teh & Lek, 2018). Reflexivity as a process is introspection on the role of subjectivity in the research process. It is a continuous process of reflection by researchers on their values (Parahoo, 2006) and of recognizing, examining, and understanding how their "social background, location and assumptions affect their research practice" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 17). It can also be "some of the most challenging and important work in qualitative research" (Mitchell et al. 2018, p. 673). For a researcher, as well as the reader it is vital to describe contextual intersecting relationships (e.g., race, socio-economic status, age, cultural background) between the participants and him/herself. Berger (2015, 220) claims that "Researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal".

Apart from its value in qualitative research Warton (2017, in Bolton 2018, 2) identified reflexivity as a vital skill that future professionals must develop, describing it as "a key element of employability in today's professions". McKay (2008) described reflective practice as a professional imperative.

## 2. Literature review

Dewey (1933) identified reflection as a different manner of thinking, in which reflection stemmed from doubt, hesitation or confusion triggered by a situation one experienced. According to Dewey, reflection begins with an experience and therefore facilitates learning from that experience, i.e., learning from doing. Dewey also claimed that reflective thinking moved people away from routine thinking/action (guided by tradition or external authority) and towards reflective action (involving careful, critical consideration of taken-for-granted knowledge).

Dewey's concepts provided a basis for the concept of 'reflective practice' developed by Schön (1983). Adopting a metaphor of swampy lowlands Schön (1987) identified ways in which professionals could become aware of their implicit knowledge and learn from their experiences. Schön identified two types of reflection: reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking while doing).

The metaphor of swampy lowlands implies that students as learners and future practitioners are always immersed in their work environments where they gain experiences from which they learn. They learn by trial and error, which allows them freedom in trying to find diverse solutions to any given problem. This assumption that all learners are in a swamp, finding their own ways is particularly encouraging to students who are learning how to communicate effectively in a foreign language, and who consequently suffer from low efficacy.

Being a part of swampy lowlands requires road maps and paths. These Argyris and Schön (1974) call theories-of-use. Theories-in-use are what people do habitually and without much thought. People also employ espoused theories, which are what people believe they do. By critical reflection people can bring these two theories into congruence.

In addition to the above, there are other theories, frameworks and models that describe reflective processes. For example, the single loop (reflection) and double loop (reflection and reflexivity) theory proposed by Argyris and Schön (1974). Single loop develops awareness and calls for actions but leaves underlying deeper structures untouched. Similarly, Gibb's model (1998) focuses on a single event and adds thoughts, feelings and sensemaking. Johns (2013) developed a set of cues that focus on the description of an event, one's feelings, one's knowledge and one's personal values. Lastly, and like the concept of the double loop, Smith et al (2015) proposed a set of questions known as DATA (describe, analyse, theorize and act).

All the above models are limited and thus present a danger that reflectors will limit their answers to the questions without developing their own narratives. Dewey's five-step model that allows for a wider perspective and openness is helpful, but as it examines only a personal experience, it does not accurately reflect reality.

Johns' Model of Structured Reflection (1994), used mostly in the health care field, offers a more reflexive approach. It is over-prescriptive and therefore has its disadvantages. It imposes an external framework and consequently leaves little scope for individuals to draw on their own intuitions, values and priorities. Johns has revised and developed his model, moving away from its prescriptive character in order to offer more holistic elements to encourage deeper reflection. Johns describes reflection as being "mindful of self" – whether during or after experience. He further claims that it is a "developmental process of paying attention to and learning through everyday experiences, with the goal of realizing a vision of practice as a lived reality." (Johns 2007).

The study drew partly on Johns' reflective approach, but also incorporated Schön's (1987) concept of swampy lowlands and Brookfield's (2009) *critical reflection* that uncover and investigate the paradigmatic, prescriptive and causal assumptions that inform how people practice and experience.

Students are often asked to provide feedback on the courses they complete. Although the feedback questions require the students to assess their own participation in the learning process, they do not contain a deep level of reflection. Moreover, learning diaries, which are often incorporated into courses, have a prescriptive approach whereby students are guided along throughout their reflection. Boud and Walker (1998) warn against such a 'manual' approach as it demands very little thinking, and it produces shallow reflection, and little learning for the student. Moreover, assessment of such a task is also problematic, given the personal nature of reflections.

I, therefore, conclude that neither providing feedback nor writing learning diaries provide a sufficient platform for students to develop reflexivity. This paper contributes to filling the gap by proposing a pedagogical approach which by means of encouraging students to think critically and reflect, enhances their reflective skills both as future practitioners and qualitative researchers.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach was qualitative interpretation, and the method applied was narrative analysis of the data generated by the students' reflective narratives. I designed a set of three activities and incorporated them into a one semester International Business Communication course. The course was taught to 120 first year BA international business students. In my teaching I adopted a constructivist perspective as it emphasizes the learners and their learning process first, downplaying the dominance of the teacher. This meant that the students were encouraged to learn by doing, by interacting and exchanging knowledge with each other, and through such learning experiences, develop and transform their views of themselves and reality. Reality was

reflected upon in conversations with others, and by the use of the language which came into being through discussions, argumentations and sharing views and opinions with others.

In order to ensure “qualitative rigour” (Gioia et al. 2013), while keeping an open mind, I adhered to a “systematic inductive approach to concept development” as devised by Gioia et al. (2013, 16). This approach allowed me to combine rigour and openness, as it assumed that the world is socially constructed by people who are “knowledgeable agents” (17). The data analysis was driven by the voices of the students by adopting informant-centric codes in the first-order analysis. Following Saldana (2009), I applied *in vivo* codes. In the first-order analysis I adhered very faithfully to the words and phrases used by the students. The codes were the words of the students themselves. The initial coding resulted in approximately 150-200 first-order codes per narrative. Therefore, I conducted a second phase of the analysis where I grouped these codes according to the similarities and relationships between them. This reduced the number of codes to about 50 per narrative.

In the second order analysis I attempted to elicit any possible unexpected themes that might emerge. At the point of “theoretical saturation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) I identified all possible second-order codes and developed them further into what Gioia et al. (2013) call second order “aggregate dimensions”. Following this, I created a visual data structure presentation.

I obtained the students’ permission to use their narratives as sources of data. The students were also assured about anonymity and confidence.

### **3.1 Story writing, storytelling, writing reflective narratives (reflecting on action)**

Story writing and storytelling, aimed at enhancing students’ confidence in self- reflecting, giving and receiving feedback, developing analytical and critical skills, in the process of what I coined ‘*creative discovery*’. The students’ task was to write a story (individually) prompted by a traditional 6-step story model (character/setting, the goal the character wants to achieve, the hindering powers, the assisting powers, turning point, resolution). I gave the students a set of six abstract images that corresponded to the six steps of a story structure.

After completing the first task of writing the stories, the students shared them with three other students (working in groups), thus engaging in what Ghaye (2000) calls a *reflective conversation*. Through mutual collaboration and conversation, a participatory, dialogical approach to reflective practice was achieved. Comments, peer feedback and discussion followed. The groups of four identified the themes of each other’s stories. The themes were collected and analysed in a general discussion by the whole class. Lastly, after the class the students were asked to write reflective narratives.

In order to ensure as much freedom of expression as possible the students were not required to follow any templates, nor were they limited in the length of their narratives. Only a few general prompts and suggestions were given. Here is an example of my instructions: “After the storytelling activity carried out in class, write a reflection about the activity. Remember that reflective writing is like having a dialogue with yourself. Think about the creative process you went through, the themes in your story, the other themes in the group, wonder why you made a story with these themes and not others. What do they mean to you? Think about sharing the stories within the group, how did you feel doing this. What did you get out of this activity? Connect this activity to possible benefits you might have gained as a future businessperson and a researcher.”

## **4. Findings**

The reflective narratives created by the students after the class activity revealed an abundance of themes. I aggregated them into the following categories: Unconventional Learning, Creativity, Surprise and Discovery, Reflecting on True Self and Knowing Others, Stories and Business.

### **4.1 Unconventional Learning**

The following excerpts from the students’ reflective narratives highlight the reflections on the way of learning and its connection to enhancing creativity and building confidence.

*“I had a lot of fun doing this kind of essay writing. It really brought out my creative character and made me feel free to let my own thoughts and feelings out. It was very interesting to hear how the*

*others solved this task and overall even though first I did not understand why this would help us, now I do”.*

*“This assignment gave me more courage to read out texts written by me. Also, it was very different to other assignments we have had so it was great fun. In business life it must also be crucial to have imagination and courage, and I think these are the things I got out of this activity”.*

*“I enjoyed this practice and hope to see more this kind of work. I can implement these to my future and to business too. You have to be very creative in marketing for example, but it goes to all business in general. How you write your CV, how you tell your personal story in interview etc.*

*“It was fun assignment, something to deviate from the norm”.*

The narratives also showed that the students felt encouraged to express themselves both by writing their stories and sharing them with their peers.

*“I was confident about sharing my story, because we had to write it quick and I think it is not a problem to me to write stories. Of course, I was not 100% confident, but I got it through. I did not really understand the meaning of this exercise, but it helped me to use my imagination and to be brave enough to share my story to others, even if it would be silly”.*

*“Even though I have confidence, this situation demonstrates that I still have a long way to go before I can present any ideas with no fears”.*

*“This session taught me to be brave and show my work to others no matter how silly I think it is because in the end of the day the people in my group also had an equally silly but thrilling story as well. Although sceptical at first on the importance of the story telling idea in the end I learnt a great deal on how even silly things have a meaning behind them and how you interpret it is one hundred percent on you without any limits and judgment. It will help me in the future to envision anything even though it might not make sense in the beginning”.*

## **4.2 Storytelling and business**

The narratives also demonstrated students making connections between storytelling and its value and application to situations in a business environment.

*“I think storytelling is a very important part of business. You need to be able to present yourself, your company and the products you are selling to an audience and storytelling is a great way to do that. I want to specialize in marketing as a part of my degree, so I feel like the skill of storytelling will be even more important than it would be if I majored in finance.*

*“This might help me in marketing. To create a story. A word you want to spread to the world or a thing which makes people think. The biggest one might be that you want to create a story which effects on people’s feelings, example through commercials, like the one which we watched in class”.*

*“I can see that storytelling has very much to do with business. People in different roles need the skill to create a good story to support for example a product. Today, there is very many possible competitors in every single areas of business. With a good story it is possible to stand out from the others. People in marketing, sales, entrepreneurs, and so on can use storytelling in their lives and careers. Commercials and ads are very much related to telling stories in different ways wanted and needed”.*

*“For a businessperson it is important to be creative and sometimes the creativity has to come fast and I think that this activity was good for practicing that since we did not have so much time to complete our stories”.*

## **4.3 Reflecting on true self and knowing others**

*“Business can be strenuous in whatever field you are specializing in, but if you focus on releasing your emotions, whether it be through storytelling or reflective practice, a person is able to lighten their emotional load. Storytelling can be a ‘less direct’ approach to reflective writing, because instead of directly writing about your feelings, you are indirectly expressing your emotions. If a*

*certain person struggles with being open about their challenges, storytelling may be a perfect approach for this individual”.*

*“While I see the cards one way another person saw them differently. This is also an invaluable tool in business because getting multiple perspectives on a problem can open many paths to a solution instead of just one”.*

*“I believe I am somebody who tries to overcome obstacles but like the main character in my story I often need the help of friends and family to achieve my goals. Outside of the story it showed me that lots of people have similarities even when they come from different cultures and backgrounds. By searching for those similarities, I should be able to form effective partnerships and teams in business which can hopefully propel me to success”.*

#### 4.4 Creativity, surprise and discovery

*“When I saw the cards I got handed out, first I thought it would be almost impossible for me to connect them into a story. But as I started writing, after a while I got into that magical world of the cards and I enjoyed it a lot”.*

*“My story had a romantic way to it which I feel like reflects my personality. The colours and images really inspired my story. It was hard sometimes to connect some cards into the story, but I feel like it turned out well. When we were reading our stories in the small groups, I was so surprised. First of all, to hear what Mike wrote about the same cards that I had, second to hear the other stories at our table and third to see how they managed to connect their cards into a story. It was so much fun for me to listen to everyone, I really enjoyed their stories”.*

*“When I started, suddenly I could not stop writing. I wanted to have the story with deep meaning and interesting characters. It took me some time because my story was a bit long, but that did not bother me because I liked the process”.*

*“This activity enhanced my imagination and creativity”.*

Through the activity of story writing and storytelling, the students experienced an opportunity to overcome the initial confusion when faced with the task of creating coherent stories based on abstract images. As they began the creative process of writing they realized that the task became not only easy but also enjoyable. Enjoyment triggered creativity, and as the stories emerged the realization of completing a seemingly impossible task created additional enjoyment.

The initial confusion by the requirements of the task was overcome by the process of writing and was superseded by discovery that, just by doing, one can overcome initial difficulties. This was followed by a discovery of the value of the assignment.

The non-judgmental environment of small groups in which the stories were shared, as well as positive peer feedback not only encouraged self-expression, but also created an opportunity to get to know one's self and others in a meaningful way.

#### 5. Discussion

During participation in the activity in class and when reflecting on it afterwards the students went through a developmental learning process during which they were asked to pay attention to their reactions, analyse and reflect on them in order to realise their part in the lived reality (Johns, 2007). They were also in a situation where they had to investigate and reflect on their personal paradigmatic assumptions about themselves and others. By carrying out a critical reflection (Brookfield, 2009), they discovered the assumptions that inform the way they experience, perceive and practice.

Dewey's (1933) concept of reflection as a manner of thinking that stems from doubt, confusion and hesitation resonated in the data obtained from the reflective narratives of the students. Faced with the task of creating a coherent story out of abstract and confusing images created a sense of confusion (How can I do this? Why am I doing this in a business communication course?), followed by doubt and hesitation (I do not think I can do it. I cannot write a story), and fear (What if I cannot do it?). All these reactions were triggered by a situation in which the students faced an experience of dealing with a daunting, or a seemingly impossible task.



Despite the initial confusion, doubt, hesitation and fear, prompted by the requirements of completing the assignment on time, the students began the writing process. This paradoxically non-conductive to learning, experience did not hinder the students in carrying out the assignment. The fear they experienced at the beginning was overcome as the stories began taking shape on paper, and the learning process begun. The creative pull that the assignment called for cleared the confusion, dispersed the doubts, and encouraged the students to overcome the fear.

They learned by doing and reflecting on the activity afterward, which Schön coined as reflection-on-action. Their learning was not limited only to learning about the actual activity they took part in, but also about themselves as actors performing in that activity. They experienced another stage in the learning process: discovery and surprise. They discovered the potential of innovative ways of dealing with a difficult task and experienced a sense of surprise when they were able to perform successfully.

When reflecting on their own reactions and thoughts during and after the activity the students experienced being lost in the swampy lowlands Schön (1987) where they became aware of their implicit knowledge of themselves, and where they were encouraged to reflect more deeply, which Johns describes as being about “mindful of self”. What begun as uncritical story making and creating fictitious stories out of abstract images turned out to be a highly critical reflection where the real world was depicted through unreal characters. What Brookfield (2009) coined as *critical reflection* took shape in the reflective narratives of the students. The contents of the stories (themes, characters, endings) uncovered the paradigmatic, prescriptive and causal assumptions that informed the way the students practiced and experienced, as well as their fears, hopes, desires, values and principles.

Finally, the element of discovery and surprise of learning in a different and unconventional way moved the students’ thinking away from routine and conventional ways of learning where the external authority of a teacher guides them in their learning. Instead they experienced deep levels of learning in a relaxed and fun atmosphere, where there were no wrong or right answers, and where any students’ input was accepted and acknowledged as valuable, both by the peers and the teacher.

## **6. Conclusions**

The emergence of a reflective paradigm in higher education, as well as the need to develop students’ readiness in working life called for novel pedagogical approaches specifically geared at strengthening critical reflection of undergraduate business students to better prepare them for their future work as researchers and business persons.

I proposed a storytelling activity designed to develop reflexivity. The analysis of the contents of the stories created by the students revealed that what they begun as uncritical story creating turned out to be a critical reflection of their own presumptions. The characters in the stories were embodiments of the students fears, dreams, hopes and desires.

The reflective narratives showed that storytelling proved to be an unconventional and innovative means to learn and discover. Whilst having fun the students developed and learned skills that were identified as crucial for future business professionals and qualitative researchers. These skills were critical analytical skills, empathy (self- and others awareness), awareness of the general environment, confidence in tackling challenging and unexpected tasks, creative problem solving, discovering and believing in one’s own creative potential. These skills significantly contribute to strengthening the reflexivity skills.

I see it as the first step in further development of deeper analytical and critical skills, cultural awareness, communication confidence and self-efficacy of young graduates as they face real-life practical situations in business as well as in academia.

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