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CRITICAL REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AS A MEANS TO ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING AND STRENGTHEN CONFIDENCE AND SELF-EFFICACY OF UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS

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The emergence of a reflective paradigm in higher education in the last two decades, as well as the need to develop oral communication skills and self-efficacy have been emphasized as skills whose development should be included business school curricula. The ability to critically reflect has been identified as a crucial part of employability. This calls for developing pedagogical approaches that will stimulate students' critical thinking skills, encourage self-review as well as convey practice realities.

A pedagogical approach was created and incorporated into one semester International Business Communication course taught to undergraduate international business students. It aimed at developing reflexivity and strengthening confidence and self-efficacy. It was applied in three activities: (1) introducing the students to the concept of reflexivity (reflecting on reflection), (2) writing reflectively about own cultural identity (reflection in action), (3) story writing and storytelling (reflecting on action).

The methodological approach used was qualitative interpretation, and the method applied was narrative analysis of the data generated by reflective writing created by the students.

The findings showed that reflexivity was identified as a new concept, both necessary and helpful in self-development. Reflecting on one's own cultural identity created different types of awareness, which contributed to developing deeper knowledge about one's own cultural identity. Reflecting on story writing and storytelling showed the following learning benefits: discovering creative potential, as well as developing confidence in dealing with new, unexpected and challenging situations. Moreover, the following additional learning benefits were identified: enhanced openness towards the immediate environment, improved understanding of otherness, and the applicability of the above skills for business professionals. Ultimately, reflexivity proved to be an effective means in strengthening confidence and self-efficacy.

Keywords: Reflective practice, Confidence, Self-efficacy.

Introduction

Oral communication skills as well as self-efficacy for the professional success of students have been emphasized as skills whose development should be included business schools' curricula (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Du-Babcock, 2006; Cavanagh, Leeds & Peters, 2019). Wharton (2017) in Bolton, 2018, 2) claims that "reflective practice can enable future professionals to learn from experience about:

themselves, their studies, their work; the way they relate to home and work, significant others and wider society and culture; the way social and cultural structures are formed and control us. Indeed, having the ability to reflect is a key element of employability in today's professions".

The emergence of a reflective paradigm in higher education in the last two decades, as well as the need to develop confidence and self-efficacy call for developing pedagogical approaches that will stimulate students' critical thinking skills, encourage self-review as well as convey practice realities. The challenge is, therefore, for practitioners within higher education to develop pedagogical approaches that will address development of the above-mentioned skills and prepare the students for the demands of the labor market, therefore ensuring their future employability.

In the context of universities of applied sciences, the goal of business communication courses is not only to increase oral communication skills, but to improve future job performance as well. Therefore, business programs should focus on developing self-efficacy in oral communication as well as oral communication skills themselves.

This paper presents an application of such pedagogical methods applied in a set of course activities aimed specifically at developing reflexivity and self-efficacy of undergraduate business students, within the context of a university of applied sciences. It also demonstrates that the pedagogical solutions applied not only produced the desired learning outcomes, but also produced additional benefits to the students.

Literature Review

Research indicates that there is a seeming disconnect between the presence of practices that develop and strengthen the confidence of business students in business school curricula and employers' perceptions of a lack of those skills in recent graduates. In other words, the employers point out that, whilst in professional settings, the business graduates show lack of ability to demonstrate the skills they have learned during their studies. One possible reason for this is that even though students learn oral communication skills in an academic setting, they lack the confidence to apply them in more stressful, business situations in real work environments (D'Aloisio, 2006; Ortiz et al., 2016). Research has also demonstrated that having a skill to communicate does not guarantee successful performance of that same skill; individuals must also feel confident in their ability to employ that skill in a given situation (Bandura, 1977).

Tucker & McCarthy (2001) posit that self-efficacy is vital for activating a skill set, especially in novel or high-stress situations, and it is the most important factor for predicting whether people will transfer skills learned in one setting to another (Tucker & McCarthy, 2001; Cavanagh, Leeds & Peters, 2019). Therefore, developing the oral communication skills must go hand-in-hand with ensuring that students will also develop confidence and self-efficacy.

Wharton (2017) in Bolton (2018) points to yet another vital skill that future professionals must develop: reflexivity, which they identify as "a key element of employability in today's professions". McKay (2008) describes reflective practice as a professional imperative. 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 they actually 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 similar to the concept of the double loop, Smith et al (2015) proposed a set of questions known as DATA (describe, analyze, 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 author draws partly on Johns' reflective approach, but also incorporates 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 individuals 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.

The author, therefore, concludes that neither providing feedback nor writing learning diaries provide a sufficient platform for students to develop reflexivity or boost their confidence and self-efficacy. 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 confidence and self-efficacy.

Methodology

The methodological approach stems from qualitative interpretation, and the method applied was narrative analysis of the data generated by the students' reflective narratives. A set of three activities was designed and incorporated into a one semester International Business Communication course. The course was taught to 120 first year BA international business students. A constructivist perspective was adopted as it

emphasizes the learner and their learning process first, downplaying the dominance of the teacher. This meant that the teacher encouraged the students to learn by doing, by interacting and exchanging knowledge with others, and through such learning experiences, develop and transform their views of themselves and reality. Reality was reflected upon in conversations with others, and also by the use of the language which came into being through discussions, argumentations and sharing views and opinions with others.

The three activities aimed specifically at developing students' critical reflective skills, confidence and self-efficacy. They were incorporated throughout the course and were connected to other components of the course. This connection was purposeful as it facilitated learning and developing other skills at the same time (public speaking, presenting, academic writing, academic analytical skills). The activities were grouped into three parts: (1) introducing the students to the concept of reflexivity (reflecting on reflection), (2) writing reflectively about one's own cultural identity (reflection in action), (3) writing reflectively (reflecting on action) on story writing and storytelling.

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

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

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

Activity 1

Introduction to reflexivity, reflecting on reflection

The first activity introduced the students to the concept of reflexivity. As a follow-up to an interactive lecture, the students' task was to read an academic article, 'Reflective practice' (2008) by Linda Finlay, and to write a summary about it. The students were also asked to adopt what Finlay (2008) calls Reflective practice as introspection, which invites students to engage in solitary self-dialogues in which they probe personal meanings and emotions. They express those dialogues by writing their own reflective narrative about the usefulness of reflection and reflexivity in learning and working. To ensure as much freedom of expression as possible, there were no prescribed guiding questions, no length limitation, and no specific template to follow.

The learning objectives of this activity were as follows:

- -Developing reading and critical analytical skills in academic English
- -Writing an academic summary
- -Learning about the concept of reflexivity
- -Writing a critical reflective narrative

The assessment of this activity was based on the comprehensiveness of the summary and was graded on the scale 1-5.

Activity 2

Writing reflectively about own cultural identity, reflection in action

The second activity, connected to the subject of cross-cultural matters in communication, aroused the students' awareness of their own cultural identities as well as their cultural environment. The students were introduced to the most salient theories in cultural studies and as a follow-up they wrote a reflective narrative: the cultural me. The students' task was to engage in intersubjective reflection (Finlay, 2008) which made them concentrate on relational contexts, and the emergent and negotiated nature of their cultural encounters, as well as reflect on their own cultural identity. They were asked to tune into the cultural encounters and situations over the period of ten days. The students were asked to write their reflections in a form of notes, short paragraphs, separate sentences, or any other forms of communication, based on their observations. An electronic notebook was created in order to facilitate spontaneous writing using smartphones, tablets, etc. Like the previous activity, to ensure as much freedom of expression as possible there was neither a length limitation and nor a template to follow. Only a few general prompts and suggestions were given whose function was to guide the students. Here is an example of the author's instructions:

“ This assignment is all about you and your cultural identity. Think about who you see yourself as in terms of your cultural belonging/non belonging, what culture means to you, what you have experienced and what you thought about it when it happened, how you felt, etc. The point of this assignment is to write thoughts, ideas and reflections whenever something comes to your mind, every day, for example. Do not write it in one sitting. Real reflection happens all the time”.

The learning objectives of this activity were as follows:

- Becoming culturally self-aware
- Becoming culturally aware of others
- Developing cultural understanding of self and others
- Learning the concepts of cultural studies
- Reflecting critically on one's own cultural identity

The assessment of this activity was based on the extent of reflexivity and was assessed as pass/needs improvement.

Activity 3

Story writing, storytelling, writing reflective narratives (reflecting on action)

The third activity, story writing and storytelling, aimed at enhancing students' confidence in expressing themselves, giving and receiving feedback, analytical and critical skills, in the process of what the author 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). A set of six abstract images corresponded to the six steps of a story structure.

After completing writing of the stories, the students shared them with three other students, 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 analyzed in a general discussion by the whole class. Lastly, after class the students were asked to write reflective narratives.

Similar to the previous activities, to ensure as much freedom of expression as possible there was no length limitation and no template to follow. Only a few general prompts and suggestions were given.

Here is an example of the author's 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?"

And finally, what did you gain from it as a future businessperson. Please do not write this reflection as simple answers to the topics above. They are only there to guide you in case you are lost. Write more!"

The learning objectives of this activity were as follows:

- Encouraging creativity and innovative thinking
- Developing critical thinking
- Building confidence by encouraging self-expression
- Strengthening writing skills
- Developing communication and argumentation skills
- Developing listening skills

Findings

Activity 1

Introduction to reflexivity, reflecting on reflection

The author was aware of some pedagogic concerns that teaching reflective practice entails. One of them was the developmental readiness of the students, and the extent to which forcing students to reflect may actually prove counterproductive. Some writers, for example Hobbs, 2007; Girffin, 2003; Burrows, 1995 posit that learners need to be developmentally ready to engage in critical reflection and that some individuals may be incapable of doing so. The respective abilities of 'novices' and 'experts' are relevant here. There is evidence that novices, by definition lacking 'practical mastery', are inclined to follow models mechanically, and also that such reliance on models lessens with experience (Gordon, 1984). As a result, the reflection that does occur can only be less effective.

The findings of the study support this claim. The majority of the students provided their reflections, but it was clear that they focused mainly on writing the summary, as this part of the assignment was graded. Their reflections were short and, in some cases, lacking.

Another relevant pedagogic concern is related to the compulsory element in reflective practice. When students are required to reflect through learning and assessment exercises, reflections can end up being superficial, strategic and guarded. Where assessment lurks, any genuine, critical self-examination may well be discouraged. Even though the reflections in the study were not graded, less attention was paid to complete it in depth.

However, several themes were identified and placed into the following categories: Reflexivity, Writing academic summaries, and Reading academic articles. When talking about reflexivity itself the students described it as a collaborative activity and a vital skill.

"My reflective practice relies heavily on dialogue and collaboration with others. Once an idea has matured, I attempt to articulate it to an interested audience. My words are often improvised but if the idea is clear enough in my mind then I can express myself in a creative way. My oral presentation skills serve as a filter for interrogating ideas as they come to me. Sometimes I'm pleasantly surprised to arrive at the understanding of an idea in conversation as I introduce it to a listener."

“Reflective practice has been a vital aspect of formulating my perspectives and understanding how to improve my behaviour.”

“Personally, I see this concept as an invaluable skill in academic and occupational settings as well as in life as a whole. Everyone does it organically to some extent, and I feel as though it cannot be forced. The idea of a novice not branching away from technical procedures rings true in my own life. I have been in many situations, specifically in academic settings, where I was able to improvise and come up with solutions on the spot only after getting my footing in the environment. I have been able to translate this to other parts of my life as well. I think the fact that I tend to be creative and “wing-it” a lot is somewhat just a part of who I have always been naturally, but it was also nurtured by the academic settings in which I inadvertently used skills and concepts consistent with reflective practice.

The students also referred to reflexivity as an interesting subject and helpful in self-development.

“Self-reflection is a very important ‘skill’ that everyone should be able to do. It is a good thing when you can look at your past and reflect on what you’ve done so that you can better yourself for the future.”

“This is not the first time I come across of reflection. I have always found it very difficult to understand. Its thinking critically, but not exactly. So, what is it? I feel that this is partly because I’m just not that interested in the subject. This time I decided to give it a shot and see what happens.

I read the article and found it difficult to understand. So, I read it many times over and I had to translate the words that were new to me. I started to realize why this subject is important and how it will affect your personal ability to grow as a professional. I was also taken by the fact that the author mentions that this subject really is complex and understanding it is really hard. This gave me the opportunity to be more forgiving towards myself, for not trying hard enough to understand the definition of reflections.”

The students also mentioned learning aspects of the activity. These were placed into two categories: Learning something new, and a valuable assignment.

“I did not have any knowledge on this topic beforehand, so I do hope I have learned somehow more about reflecting.”

“I do find that one’s ability to able to use reflective practice can be really important and useful”.

“Doing this assignment will help me in future to respect reflective practise and to try to take into consideration wider aspects like organizational, political and economic issues as well.”

“Prior to reading this article, I would never have thought about the stages or types of reflection. I simply reflected by analysing what happened and then finding a solution. The essay has broadened my knowledge of reflection and it offers some points that I will consider when reflecting in the future.”

“This kind of practice will surely be helpful for future studies and work. I’m sure it is a vital skill to be able to point out the main subject from a conversation or from an article.”

When referring to writing and reading academic article the students expressed difficulties, but also readiness to learn.

“It was a difficult task, at least for me.”

“The summary task was really hard because the academic text was very hard to understand. I’m sure it will be easier when I get used to it.”

“I have never written a summary before, but I think I did a good job as most (if not all) key ideas and subjects have been covered. It was good rehearsing the in-text referencing as it is something, I have previously never done either. All in all, I am happy with the result I have produced.”

Table 1 illustrates the learning objectives set against the themes identified by the students. It clearly shows that the learning objectives set by the author in activity 1 were achieved. Even though the students found it difficult to read and understand the academic article, they submitted the completed assignment to the best of their abilities with enthusiasm and readiness to learn.

Table 1. Learning objectives vs outcomes, themes identified by the students

REFLEXIVITY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES	OUTCOMES
Introduction of the concept of critical reflexivity	New subject Vital skill Collaborative activity
Application of critical skills	Interesting subject Helpful in self-development
Developing reading and analytical skills of academic English Writing academic summaries	New Difficult, challenging
Writing critical reflective narratives	New Short

Activity 2

Writing reflectively about one’s own cultural identity, reflection in action

The analysis of the reflective narratives Cultural Me revealed different themes identified by the students. The themes varied depending on the students’ national belonging and the nature and longevity of their residence in Finland. The themes were placed into four categories: Awareness and Negativity (among Finnish students), Awareness and Openness (among foreigners: temporary sojourners), Awareness and Cultural identity Work (among foreigners: permanent residents), Awareness and Ambiguity (among students with mixed cultural roots).

The narratives of all the Finnish students showed enhanced awareness of their cultural identity characterized by negativity. However, the awareness also triggered varied thoughts and emotions depending on the students’ previous experiences. Within the group of the Finnish students, the Finns permanently residing in Finland expressed, on the one hand anxiety and negative emotions about being Finnish, as well as a sense of not belonging in Finland. On the other hand, other students expressed strong adherence to being Finnish.

“I see myself very attached to my culture when I have guests. Today I had guests and, in my culture, especially in Carelian culture, it is very important to make your guests feel good and also feed them well. I was able to see that in myself today.”

“Finnish culture is a very prominent part of my cultural identity and thus when I go to the bus stop or metro stops I always smile at the fact that in Helsinki people don’t really mind if they stand close to others or sit next to strangers, its normal here,

Although, it is a ridiculous thing to do I do think it demonstrates how content we are with ourselves, we don’t need or crave the closeness of others all the time and we are happy just being there and perhaps observing what is going on. I think it also shows trust is not just given but it has to be earned.”

“I realized that Finnish customer service is so different compared to Finns’ normal interaction and behavior. Finnish customer service is very open and happy and usually a salesperson is very talkative. Now that I think about it more, it feels odd.”

“For a Finn, having your own space is important and it is really easy to see it in public places, such as trams, buses, gyms... I can also notice myself looking for a place that has less people around me.”

“ I’ve never felt myself as a true Finn. I’ve always felt a little more comfortable when talking to people with other cultural backgrounds, especially with Canadians. While I was admiring the scenery of small lakes and lush forests, and enjoying myself a Finnish craft beer, I thought to myself: This is one of the only few situations it feels good to be in Finland and being a Finn in general”.

The Finnish students who had experiences of living outside of Finland expressed culture shock upon return. All the Finnish students pointed out a desire to travel abroad to learn and adopt different cultural habits. The majority of the Finnish students, permanently residing in Finland, expressed negative emotions when referring to their cultural roots.

“I know it reads Finland in my passport but at certain age I tried to get rid of Finnish culture in me. I never felt I fit in Finnish society and always felt better abroad. Finnish culture seemed so dark, grim and unhappy. At least in historical way.

There were some Finnish culture traits that I adored or liked. Sisu and the Finnish spirit but then it all went down and I don’t see it anymore. “

Foreign students staying in Finland on a temporary basis (temporary sojourners) i.e. exchange students expressed strong cultural awareness characterised by openness. They were very curious about Finnish culture, they often made comparisons between habits and customs in their own cultures and Finnish culture, and often expressed preference of Finnish ways. They were eager to learn new Finnish ways. In many cases they identified experiencing culture shock especially regarding education.

Exchange student from Austria: *“Sometimes, when I am in the gym doing my workout, I have to give a quiet smile. The reason is because back home there are so many people who are staring at me stealthily (or not) every time I do my workout. Sometimes they do it because they are impressed, sometimes just because they are nasty. Hardly ever also someone comes over and says a compliment. But here, the Finns are never saying anything, and they are also not staring at me. They give you the privacy needed because they do that here in Finland. I have to say, it is really nice to have this amount of privacy in the gym here but sometimes it is also a bit boring because no one is ever having a conversation with you”.*

Exchange student from Russia: *“I personally think that in Finland is well-being on such a high level, that Finns do not appreciate it. Almost every day in the school there are a few Finnish classmates, who complain about almost everything. It annoys me so much, because I think that student at the university should have another attitude.”*

“Sometimes I am thinking about that, that maybe the school should have had more difficult entrance exams, cause some people just should not be there. I do not feel comfortable if I say that it is too easy, everyone stares at me because of what I said. There is lack of motivation among students, I think that is because of the fact, that the majority cannot imagine worse school system or condition of life. I can.”

Exchange student from Slovakia: *“I recognized that the young people here are divided into 2 groups. The first one is, that the people are engaged or in serious relationship, and the second one is the extreme opposite, that they do want just the freedom and time for themselves. I wonder why it is so. In Slovakia the majority of people in my age want to have the proper relationships, because they know that as they are aging it is more difficult to find someone who fits. Here the people think more about today, not future. Have no plans, goals, dreams. (The majority). I know that Finland support the traditional families, so I wonder what suddenly changed that the young people just want to be free”.*

Foreign students residing in Finland permanently, expressed cultural awareness characterised by cultural identity work. Their narratives revealed the following themes: amazement and frustration, adherence to and pride in their own culture, comparisons between their native cultures and Finland, attempts to combine both cultures.

“My culture is a combination of two different cultures, Finnish and Filipino. My values are a combination of the two, but I do not agree with all values of both cultures. Hofstede’s Individualism World map shows the Finns being more individual and the Filipino more collective. As for myself I am definitely more individual”.

“Last 9 years I have been living in Finland and become Finn by passport. I don’t feel myself belonging to modern Ukrainians and still cannot belong to Finns. My identity formed by my past does not exist anymore. Currently I am on crossroad.”

The final group of students were individuals with mixed cultural identities. Their narratives expressed cultural awareness characterized by awareness and ambiguity, and revealed the following themes: tension and frustration (who am I?), a sense of being located in-between, a sense of necessity to reject one culture in order to create space for another (preferred) culture, and lastly, disappointment and confusion.

“I had an identity crisis until a family friend asked me: ;Where do you think you are from? It took me a while to formulate my answer, but I concluded that, I am mentally Japanese and physically Finnish. Specifically, I am mentally Japanese since I grew up with Japanese values, morals and mental behavior. On the other hand, I am physically Finnish since I use Finnish in my daily physical life. “

“Sometimes though, as I rely too much on being aware of where my heritage comes from, I feel that I easily loose grip of who I truly am, instead of where my heritage comes from. Even though cultural heritage is a big part of one’s identity, I feel as if it may also hinder you from grasping who you are when all those stories of cultural diversity is stripped away.”

Table 2 illustrates the learning objectives set against the themes identified by the students. It clearly shows that the learning objectives set by the author in the activity 2 were achieved.

Table 2. Learning objectives vs. outcomes; themes based on students’ reflections

CULTURE AND I

<u>LEARNING OBJECTIVES</u>	<u>OUTCOMES</u>
Becoming culturally self-aware	Awareness and ambiguity
Becoming culturally aware of others	Awareness and negativity
Developing cultural understanding of self and others	Awareness and openness Awareness and identity work
<hr/>	
Learning the concepts of cultural studies	“Connecting theory to me”
Reflecting critically on own cultural identity	“Good to think of who one is”

Activity 3

Story writing, storytelling, writing reflectively (reflecting on action)

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

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 really enjoyed myself during the storytelling activity”,

“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”.

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”.

Expressing 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 expression 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”.

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 colors 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.

Table 3. Learning objectives vs. outcomes; based on students’ reflections

STORYWRITING, STORYTELLING

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

OUTCOMES

Encouraging creativity

and innovative thinking

Confusion, surprise, discovery

Developing critical thinking

Building confidence

Expressing True Self and Knowing Others

by encouraging self-expression

Strengthening students' writing skills

Enhancing listening skills

Developing communication

Stories and Business

and argumentation skills

Developing listening skills

Discussion

Dewey's (1933) concept of reflection as a manner of thinking that stems from doubt, confusion and hesitation resonates 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 (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 seemingly impossible task.

The students experienced the stages of confusion, hesitation and fear, and that the experience facilitated their learning. 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 cultural identities 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". The students went through a developmental learning process that lasted ten days. During this period, they were asked to pay attention to their everyday experiences, 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.

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 everything was accepted as valuable.

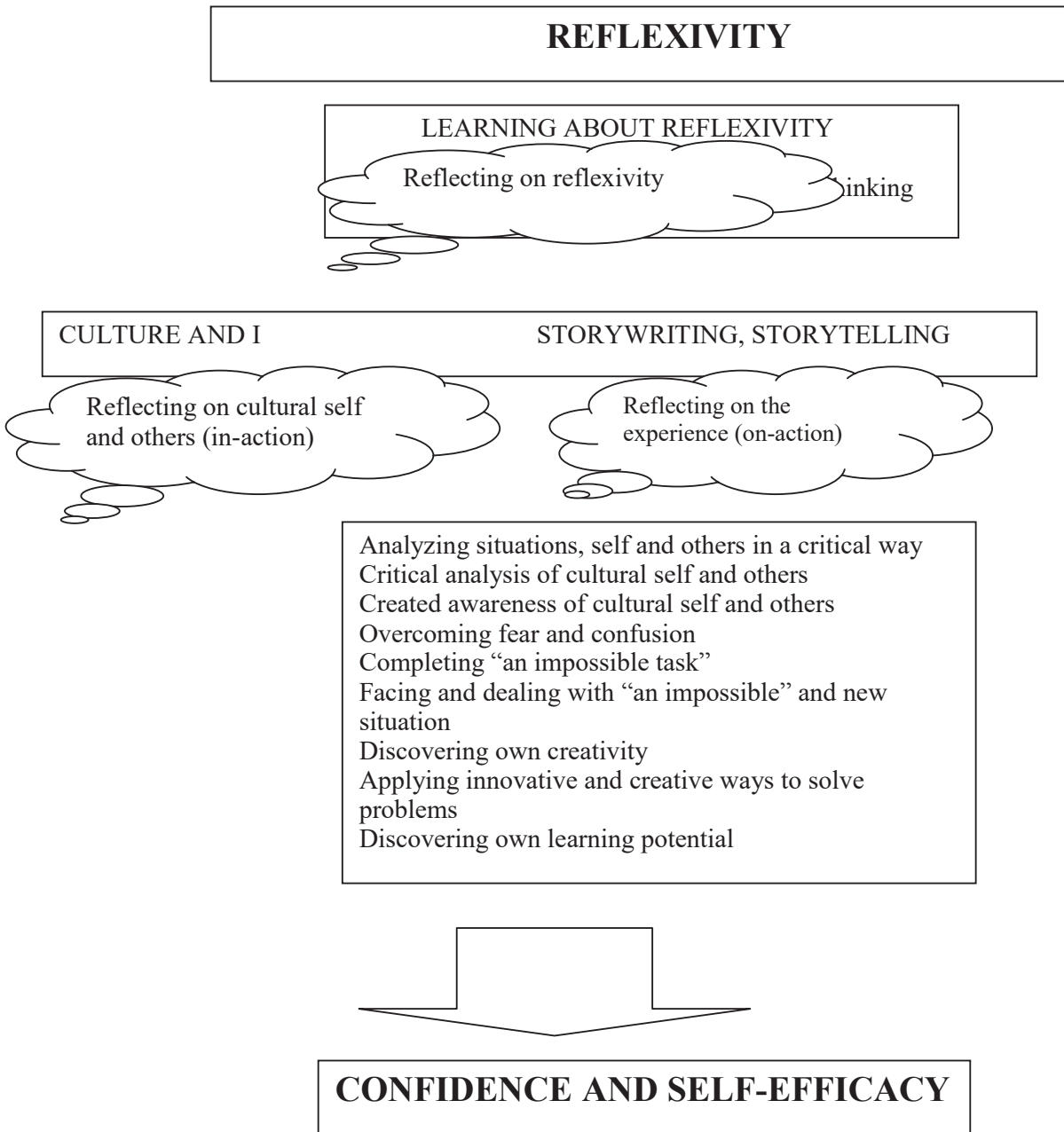


Figure 1. Reflexivity as a means to enhance confidence and self-efficacy

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 the confidence and self-efficacy of undergraduate business students to better prepare them for the labor market.

The author proposed a set of three activities all designed to incorporate reflexivity as a means of boosting confidence and self-efficacy of said students. These activities were: (1) introducing the students to the concept of reflexivity (reflecting on reflection), (2) writing reflectively about their own cultural identities (reflection in action), and (3) story writing and storytelling (reflecting on action).

Through a narrative analysis of the students' reflective narratives, the author concludes that reflexivity proved to be an unconventional and innovative means to develop crucial skills for future business professionals. These skills are critical analytical skills, an awareness of self, others and the general environment, confidence in tackling challenging and unexpected tasks, creative problem solving, and believing in one's own creative potential. These skills significantly contribute to strengthening the confidence and self-efficacy of young graduates as they face real-life practical situations.

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