Thicken the plot - don’t live your life with a thin story: An invitation to the experiential learning cycle

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ABSTRACT

The discussion focuses on the way in which learning events and reflections depict the development of professional identities. It tells the story of three reflective writers within psychology: A researcher, a therapist, and an organisational psychology student within the department that fostered the reflexive stance. Our professional development intersected at the University of South Africa (Unisa); apart from working together our academic development was formalised through reflective writing. This is the basis from which our professional identities were co-constructed. The relationship continues because we wish to nurture our professional identities by collaborating across three disciplines. The article summarises the identified themes emerging from the collection of our daily reflections from 2007 to 2011. The analysis is also a meta-reflection of possibilities of alternative career narratives within psychology as they recreate their lives. Reflection represents a form of self-care, a way of re-defining boundaries, a meaning-making tool that leaves an audit trail of the ‘aha’ moments of when understanding deepens. This is the story of individuals during
reflective writing within their community of practice and of the emergence of reflection as research.

**Keywords:** Community of practice; Experiential Learning Cycle/Theory; interdisciplinary collaboration; professional identities/development; psychology career narratives; reflexive practice

**CAREER PATHS OF A REFLECTIVE THREESOME**

This article is an interwoven account of two counsellors and one psychologist who shared a student counselling milieu. It is an account of their divergent career paths and their convergent efforts to make sense of their joint experiences. Unexpectedly, the story of a department emerged among the different reflections. The place of work interjected its own story: One permanent staff member and two contract workers, who started as peer helpers, became assistant student counsellors and then completed the career counselling internship. The following section clarifies the terms ‘peer helper’, ‘assistant student counsellor’ and ‘career counselling intern’.

**THE MILIEU**

At the student counselling department of Unisa’s Western Cape Region, students who aspire to become psychologists work with three permanent student counselling staff members to extend services to 28 000 students (in 2011). Three different levels of practice are distinguished: Peer helpers, assistant student counsellors and career counselling interns. Barnard and Kruger (2010) indicate that each level has its own designation, developmental task and scope of practice.

Peer helpers are volunteers. They are senior students majoring in psychology, and are available to be committed to the process of volunteering at the department. Their developmental task is to learn from their experiences by ‘doing’ and to integrate their experiences by reflecting. The task of reflective practice is in line with their career vision – a career in a psychological field. Their scope of practice is learning how to use university resources to contextualise the open and distance learning (ODL) experience for clients and to refer to the student counsellor when required. After their initial training they learn by ‘shadowing’ permanent and contract staff members to assist students in order become familiar with the functioning of the department and student needs. Their learning is consolidated by writing reflections after every shift (three hours a week from February to August). These reflections, which are submitted to their supervisor for comment and support, track their growth over a seven-month period. The reflection-in-action is concluded when they identify and summarise the themes evolving from the reflections and include them in the developmental portfolio for evaluation purposes.
Assistant student counsellors are appointed as contract workers, and are selected from the pool of peer helpers after the August evaluations each year. They are appointed at the university on a one-year contract that may be renewed only twice and that stipulates that they may not work more than 96 hours a month. Their developmental task is to deepen their reflective practice by integrating learning experiences meaningfully. They are required to integrate the theory they encounter with their practical experiences in the student counselling environment. This developmental opportunity requires that they are committed to ongoing supervision via case studies and training sessions; mentoring the new peer helpers; and participating in joint supervision sessions via videoconference between the student counselling offices in the regional centre and the main campus. In addition they are required to write reflections every time they have been on duty, and to submit these via e-mail to the supervisor for comments and support. In preparation for the August evaluation they identify and summarise the themes evolving from the reflections and include them in a developmental portfolio. They then compare these to the reflections written the year before and reflect on the changes. Their scope of practice is the skilful and effective use of Unisa resources to contextualise the ODL experience for clients and to refer when required. They assist students face-to-face, telephonically and electronically.

Career counselling interns are appointed contract workers selected from the pool of assistant student counsellors. The internship lasts for six months and, on successful completion, they may qualify to write the Board Exam of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) to become registered counsellors. Their developmental task is to master the use of psychometric testing and interpretation of results according to the guidelines set out by the HPCSA. At the regional campus, career counselling interns attend a weekly supervision session with an external supervisor who submits progress reports every three months. Internally they follow the guidelines set by the internal supervisor for career portfolio development. Their scope of practice is the skilful and effective application of career counselling theories and application of psychometric tests within the scope of practice as set out by the HPCSA. They counsel students face-to-face, telephonically and electronically; conduct workshops based on sound psycho-social principles, and master, administer and interpret appropriate psychometric tests. They write daily reflections and submit these to the internal supervisor for comment and support. They identify and summarise the themes evolving from the reflections and include them in the developmental portfolio for evaluation purposes. They compare these to the reflections written during the previous two years and reflect on the changes.
THE DIVERGENCE AND THE COMMON THREAD

At Master’s level the paths of the reflective writers split into different fields of specialisation: research psychology, counselling psychology and industrial and organisational psychology. Over a three-year period they shape each other through their reflexive writing in a joint setting: a regional student counselling unit in an open and distance learning institution. They see themselves as writers, readers and as knowledge makers. Their writings and discussions are part of the evolving evaluation practice in the department whereby they establish themselves as a community of practitioners.

When the focus of the research is action-related, Mouton (2001) describes the framework as emergent. It provides a direct account of experience. In our community of reflective practice, the source is a hybrid of primary and secondary textual data. The research participants are an integral part of the design, and the recursive thematic analyses of their experiences are also the source of change in their working environment. As co-researchers the emphasis is on the participants and their changing worldviews. MacKenzie and Ling (2009), in writing about the methodology that emerged through the research process, echo elements of experiences in the student counselling unit and affirm the emergent methodology. They refer to it as a reflection-on-action process, as ongoing conversations where many voices are heard in the co-constructions of realities. At the student counselling unit supervisors and students share daily experiences, with each participant choosing a unique point to reflect on. The unique point is essential in the individual meaning-making of the shared experience which is used as feedback to the group with the supervisor making adjustments accordingly.

The authors describe their participation as follows: the research psychologist sought a management tool to optimise resources and a knowledge-generating tool to help volunteers and contract staff to connect practice to theory and to reflect on the experience. She experimented with formats of reflection to encourage writing as an enhancement for practical learning experiences and growth in self-efficacy. In Fouche (2008), the counselling psychologist describes her participation as a thought-organising tool because she has much to tell, but wrestled with the problem of how to share the ideas. She imposed order on a creative mind. In Labuschagne (2009a), the industrial psychology Honours student describes how he found in reflective writing a creativity-generating tool and he fitted the new task into a well-structured day as a creative outlet. As career counselling interns the counselling psychologist and the industrial psychologist created reflection portfolios of such high quality that they transformed reflective practice in the department. The remaining part of the article gives an account of the transformation. In our collaborative environment their portfolios are available for scrutiny by new peer helpers and thus set the standard to aspire to, or to transform.
REVEALING THE PLOT

Not all peer helpers and assistant student counsellors were equally successful at writing their reflections or benefitting from them. During the supervision and evaluation we found that the group referred to as the “thin-plot narrators” were taught a technique for reflection that they executed mechanically, or resisted. Another characteristic of the thin plot narrators was anxiety as to whether they would be selected at Master’s level, but seemingly felt too threatened to write about it. In contrast, the group referred to as the “thick-plot narrators” were taught the same technique and they were curious about its usefulness. They tried it out, received feedback and continued experimenting. They did more than was required. They are characterised by determination to “self-select” for Master’s by developing a professional’s stance through reflexive practice. They applied the technique diligently but the real value was revealed when they “looked back” and saw the themes that revealed their learning. These themes were explored further in their portfolios of learning.

UNDERSTANDING OF AND RATIONALE FOR USING THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE

The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is a facilitating tool used in the unfolding of a story. The ELC method is a long-term systematic approach to learning experiences. A succinct summary of the writings of Kolb and colleagues, which is provided by the revised papers in Sternberg and Zhang (2000), refers to the four-stage learning cycle that starts with immediate or concrete experiences that form the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences. The ideas of the ELC are based on Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) that defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. When a learning experience is fully understood and made part of oneself, knowledge results. The term “experiential” is used therefore to differentiate ELT from both cognitive learning theories (which tend to emphasise cognition over affect) and behavioural learning theories (that deny any role for subjective experience in the learning process). The ELC is therefore used as a tool for recording in a step-by-step fashion how such transformation of experience results in new knowledge, behaviour and action. The learning cycle is consequently a four-stage approach and serves as the basis for writing reflections.

The ELC reflection sheet is typically an A4 sheet, divided into four quadrants. The first is the situation (concrete experience) that describes an event that stood out or a problem that was encountered. The second is feelings and the value thereof
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(Reflective observation). Here reflective writers match the feelings that arise as a result of the event or problem and say why they feel that way. They also state the value of the experience. The third quadrant is analysis (abstract conceptualising) where they describe what they learnt as a result of the event or problem (in general or specific terms). The fourth is action (actively testing) that describes the action taken to integrate insight into new behaviour, or which makes a commitment toward further investigation or reflection. A short paraphrase to personalise the reflective technique shows how easily students can become expert writers of their learning: An event X took place; this is how it affected me and the reason is . . . and the value of the event is . . .; I learnt that generally . . . and in specific terms that . . .; my next step is to . . . and . . .

The learning cycle is further refined when one of the actions have been implemented.

APPLICATION OF THE ELC

The ELC is practically illustrated by the following two examples. Labuschagne (2009a, 2009b) and Fouche (2009), both choose to name the reflection of the day. This makes it somewhat easier later to anchor the reflection in a thematic category. This also helps the supervisor to check where the difficulties lie with each submitted reflection. If the feelings/reflective observations quadrant is skipped an interview is used to discover what is happening in the student’s life that makes it difficult to integrate (or remain in touch) with feelings resulting from the concrete experience. Difficulties in the analysis quadrant necessitate an integrative discussion on how to differentiate among the different kinds of learning that are taking place in the department. A lack of action plans in the fourth quadrant indicates that the student is perhaps overwhelmed by all the activities and needs more time to process these in order to see what is possible. Finding common threads and themes in their developmental portfolios and sharing them during the evaluation sessions are important collaborative learning experiences. We see the beneficial effects during the training of the new peer helpers when they are integrated with the current assistant student counsellors. The latter present their evaluation projects to the new peer helpers and in this way set the scene for aspirations and peer learning.

Example 1 of an ELC

“Synergivity”

Situation: The supervisor and I discussed the psychometric assessments that I had completed. The goal was to find the best career profile possible for each participant. The goal with the feedback is to align each student with his or her career profile, so that the student can create a synergetic career vision.
**Feelings:** We have interpreted psychometric results before as part of my training, but I was again amazed to experience how my supervisor goes about creating meaning from the data on the table. It is a joyful experience to hear him give a voice to the background that supports the theory.

**Analysis:** I had the advantage in that I had previously spent time with each student. However, his way of integrating the information brought new themes to the surface.

**Action:** I need to improve my interpretation skills of assessments. I must explore the supportive background more thoroughly.

### Example 2 of an ELC

**Commitment?**

**Situation:** On some students’ faces there is a blank stare when they are faced with a career decision. Now...I know that it is overwhelming them to be at this university for the first time. This has happened in the past as well.

**Feelings:** Feelings of irritation about what I sense to be a lack of commitment to a career or a vision for the future – at least a guideline from which to start. It tells me that this will still happen in the future regarding different situations especially at registration time.

**Analysis:** Going through career vision and decision-making are time consuming processes and during registration time we work under pressure. It is sad that we cannot take all the necessary time as it takes time (more than one hour to determine a path to take). It is a serious decision the student must make given the long-term commitment to study.

**Action:** Gave as much information as necessary – with some I tell them to ask themselves questions such as: How do I see myself in 3 – 5 years from now? What am I good at and what do I enjoy doing? What are my opportunities out there? In this way they learn how to do a self-inquiry process.

### REFLECTIONS OF THE RESEARCH PSYCHOLOGIST

Among numerous reflections of every day experiences certain ones stand out. They are the meaningful ones, especially if one has paused to reflect. By reflecting on feelings and thoughts and writing down insights students are encouraged to make sense of their learning as part of their unfolding career stories. They enter the world of learning in a self-affirming manner.

Robertson (2000) reports on an action-research study that rests on three principles: Reciprocity, reflexivity and reflection-on-reality. The purpose of the study was
to create knowledge and build a theory regarding the professional development of school principals. Reciprocity implies that the researcher and the participants trade knowledge about theory and practice in a mutually empowering relationship. Reflexivity is integral to this process: The participants keep diaries of their reflections and evaluate their actions. Maintaining diaries, as one of the facets of reflection-in-actions, is the essence of praxis because it keeps professional knowledge aligned with changing situations of practice. This resonates with the experiences of the student counselling unit.

The ELC is a personal form of writing in the student counselling environment and is also an ethical compulsion from the trainer/supervisor’s point of view. One pays attention to the developmental needs of students when they write a reflection of how a particular workday has progressed. The supervisor reads and comments and—where necessary—adds additional training material or conducts a personal session with the student.

Students learn to “first write and then talk”. They explore to see how events may be viewed from other perspectives and learn a vital skill of self-management. Most important, they take responsibility concerning how they choose to respond and attach a deeper meaning to learning experiences because they have a written record of their responses. They will review and write further reflections as many times as necessary.

Reflexivity helps one to “uncover” the covert rules applied during the research process. The manner in which the gathering of knowledge is encouraged through the writing of ELCs coupled with the comments made by the supervisor and integrated during the evaluation period, serve as the basis for developing a career as a professional in the field of psychology. This means that those involved need to think about how this knowledge is gained, applied and reflected upon. Bleakley (1999) summarises a point made by Orr who coined the phrase “ecological literacy” to refer to reflection as an attached action – a “delving deeper into the self”, seen as “a joyful and principled participation in the world”.

Sometimes it is frustrating to insist on the writing of reflections, but as a supervisor it is affirming to see how reflective learning promotes mastery of a discipline. According to Van Deventer (2010) the paradox of learning is the question: Slave or master? He answers this by introducing the concept of agency, which is a momentary pause between slavery and mastery. The mastering and transformation of a discipline is a disruptive process. Learning strives for moments of agency. Independent learners self-reflect in their interactions with others – they are curious about and investigate the assumptions of their knowledge-creating activities. One of the limitations in the department is the selection of, and focus on, one technique among many, even though it feels as if we have not yet plumbed its depths fully. There is still much “to disturb” via the use of the ELC.
REFLECTIONS OF THE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST

Reflective writing is my development as a therapist because it bridges the gap between theory and practice. It makes room for me to see the value of my own feelings in counselling. Reflective writing is a continuous redefinition of boundaries (within me and ininteraction with others). It gives clarity to where I am in the process. I gain a sense of continuity and control during writing. It is a way of honouring my knowledge as I progressively construct a professional identity. Written reflection over three years is an act of constructive career development and the learning portfolios are living evidence of my intentions and efforts.

REFLECTIONS OF THE INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGIST

The ugly duckling did not become a swan, but a determined duck . . .

Distance learning is about self-as-agent. Volunteer work is about community, or at least about establishing oneself within a profession. The well-trained independent agent has now to do different things, because the goal is to be accepted into a family – in this case the “counselling family”. The self-narrative of the character in the story becomes a communal narrative. Although every student goes through his/her initiation as a tertiary student or as a developing professional in the field of psychology, learning the methods and secrets of an ideal tribe, new relics and rituals unfold as they move closer and closer to the new family within that tribe. It becomes more of a challenge when the new family has a different culture from what the prospective member learnt in his/her initiation. It is within this context that the ugly duckling metaphor emerges. The metaphor describes how the organisational psychology student, the duck, merges himself within a counselling tribe. This is how the initiation into the ways of eco-systemic psychology come about. In an ELC titled, Coming home: ‘This is the psychology I dreamt of’ I refer to conversations with fellow students about Ecosystemic Psychology where I experienced a visceral understanding of the nature of psychology. It changes how I write about the intersection between Psychology and Industrial and Organisational Psychology (Labuschagne, 2010). This is also how I clarify and integrate my practice. The more I write, the more my new career identity manifests itself, as illustrated by the table below.
The result is that I did not become a swan as a member of the swan family but, through persistent reflexivity, a well-connected duck. All my encounters, engagements and experiences become truths/realities as they exist in the interconnected space-time warp. The individual voices congeal into a thick collective plot, projecting the future storyline of my career.

REFLECTIONS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The reflective community, which is the student counselling department at a regional campus of an open and distance learning institution, has a vision of a much wider active community of practice constituting psychology students and professionals. We used this student conference as an important step to realise our vision. By telling our individual stories we worked to establish a mutual understanding with our participants of the nature and purpose of reflective learning as a tool in the narrative counselling environment. By elaborating on our stories and presenting examples of our work we invited participants to become the authors and the main characters of their own career story by reflecting on their experiences in psychology.
Preparation for the conference is a consolidation of our responsibility to learn from our practices as students in the field of psychology. Presenting here weaves threads through our roles as peer supervisors and managers. In conclusion, a number of reflections were selected by the student counsellor from 01 December 2010 to 31 March 2011. The factor that determined selection was: “what happened in the department during the first four months of the registration process and how did it affect us?” The respective research done by two doctoral students at Unisa served as confirmation of the experiences in our reflective community. Van der Merwe (2008) developed a model for on-line continuous development aimed at teachers. He observed that facilitators, who reflected on the process in response to the teachers, accelerated the use and quality of reflections. Schmidt (2002) researched the application of narrative techniques such as applying Kolb’s ideas in management development and found that when “teams of reflectors” are trained to ask meaning-making questions within their peer groups the capacity to resolve work-related problems is increased. Both researchers show how collaborative sharing increases the effectiveness of experiential reflective learning. Van der Merwe (2008) used an on-line group and Schmidt (2002) trained reflective teams.

Effective learning in our environment is a constructive affair – we all participate and comment on how we affect each other, focussing on what we learnt and how we learnt. We need self-reflection, but we also need to be part of an inter-reflective community. This is our emergent reality. As this information is fed through to the group, the response of the supervisor/manager is immediate and the change results in raising the functioning of the department to a new level – learning about ourselves and tweaking our tools and techniques.

We saw the emergence of the departmental story as a reflective community. The following is an example of reflective interaction.

**EXCHANGE BETWEEN SUPERVISOR AND ASSISTANT STUDENT COUNSELLORS AFTER REGISTRATION–THE “JANUARY EFFECT”**

During the August evaluation it was disconcerting to see how assistant student counsellors struggle to do well during the counselling role play. As a supervisor I may have thought that I continued to emphasise and illustrate a fluid and consistent use of the five counselling phrases only to be proved wrong in August. Although assistant student counsellors do well in portfolio and presentation categories, it is painful to witness the lack of empathic responding and rephrasing during the counselling role play. This is actually the most important part of the requisite developed abilities. In contrast, the peer helpers do well because they do role play “by the book” and we
have proof of the comparative evaluation scores over a three-year period from 2008 to 2010. What changes when a peer helper becomes an assistant student counsellor? It would seem that we are plagued by the “January effect” (mentioned below).

**SUMMARY OF RESPONSES FROM THE ASSISTANT STUDENT COUNSELLORS**

“In January we forget our training - we throw out empathic responses and respond only with (and to) content”. “Pressure – we want to deal quickly with students through the window and we cut corners – we should be sitting down with them inside – we become efficiently ‘deficient’”. “In January everyone has goals – the students and I– we want to take five modules for the first semester even though they and I have a full-time job and family – many of the discussions centre on how to adjust goals to be realistic”.

The “January-effect” was coined by the student counsellor to describe how the pressure of large student numbers during the January registration period erodes the empathic listening competence of even the most experienced counsellors. During January 2011, each of the seven people in the student counselling department dealt on average with 29 students per day. Three permanent staff members and four temporary staff members dealt with 1295 phone calls, 241 e-mails, 1350 face-to-face individual /guidance counselling sessions lasting between 20-30 minutes each and screening 1528 students to ensure that they were at the correct department. Although the Client Satisfaction Survey conducted in March indicated that the department scored a service satisfaction rate of 93%, it was disconcerting that some of our clients could not remember that they had spent time with us and completed their biographical details. The research seems to indicate that counsellors begin “to sound like anyone else”, with the result that students cannot differentiate between counsellor and administrative advisor in the most pressurised month. This year we named our “syndrome” and, during supervision and training sessions, time was spent writing reflections on how individuals are choosing to counteract it.

**TYING THE STORIES TOGETHER**

The career stories of three individuals across three disciplines in psychology did not initially note the career story of the department because it did not make itself evident. As our containing vessel, we looked in from the outside, and had to take notice of all the reflectors -and only then did the department’s own story emerge. Van der Merwe (2008) and Schmidt (2002) indicate that it is a story of connectedness: Connection with our students, our ethical practices, peers and supervisors. This mirrors our experience and points perhaps to new voices in psychology.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Sonja Barnard** is a career counsellor whose research interest is driven by the stories people tell about their careers and possible selves. Currently she is appreciating the world through her new lens, the Chaos Theory of Careers.

**Philip Labuschagne** is a career counsellor. He holds an honours degree in industrial and organisational psychology from Unisa where he also completed his internship as career counsellor. He forms part of the reflective writing community of the student counselling unit at the Parow campus. The goal of this community is to use experiential learning techniques to inform and improve their counselling practices.

**Nordlind Cazimira Fouche** is a counselling psychologist with a strong interest in career psychology. She is presently training as a group analyst and her professional interest is to contribute to the field of career psychology in South Africa by applying the group analysis principles to career group counselling in different settings.

REFERENCES


