Student Reflections and Self-Assessments in Vocational Training Supported by a Mobile Learning Hub

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to contribute knowledge about what characterizes students’ capabilities to reflect on and self-assess their professional development during four school-based vocational training courses in distance higher education. What abilities and challenges appear in their written reflections and self-assessments with critical incidents about a situation, incident, or issue in their log journals, as well as in their discussions online, face-to-face (F2F), supported by a mobile learning hub (MLH) with both mobile and blended activities? Theoretically, the study is based on five major levels of reflection: reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing. The results from a group of students’ representative excerpts demonstrate the importance of letting student teachers have agency and mediate their subjective experiences during practical vocational training in progression, supported by mobile and blended tools, to understand and make sense of experience in relation to self, others, and contextual conditions for personal and professional learning.

KEYWORDS

Critical Incident, Distance Education, Evaluator Reflection, Mobile Artefact, Self-Assessment, Vocational Training

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of academic and professional reflection, as well as self-assessment, is to develop students’ learning, enabling them to move between theory and practice and to achieve the highest level of reflection. In the context of higher education professions, frequently, reflection and self-assessment are used in both theoretical and practical courses (McIntosh, 2010). Reflection and self-assessment represent a kind of ‘higher order thinking’ to promote critical and creative ‘meta-reflexivity’ (Archer, 2010; Dickhut, 2003; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Shaheen, 2010). Inquiry and dialogic argumentation are key dimensions in critical thinking and have been identified as pathways to argumentative competence (Kuhn, 2016). Reflection and self-assessment allow students to progress to argumentative competence and to act and think critically and professionally. Practical implementations of reflection and self-assessment include, in this study, written and online oral reflections with critical incidents about a

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situation, incident, or issue, which is essentially a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning a clear situation (Flanagan, 1954). It is also important to make connections with theoretical readings and practical vocational training as a part of the teacher educational agenda, which should be modified and discussed to learn more about the specific situation, incident, or issue.

However, the common use of the concepts reflection and self-assessment is problematic, with little or no agreement on the meaning of these concepts among teachers or students. Often, it is taken for granted that students know how to think critically and write reflectively on their own. Moreover, the concepts are often unclear and used loosely to embrace a wide range of conceptions and strategies, because of a lack of teacher training in reflection and self-assessment methods (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Ryan, 2013). Boud (1999) emphasized the importance of teaching students to act and think professionally, which involves the use of reflection and reflective practice as an informal learning-to-learn tool, as well as the use of self-assessment as a formal evaluation activity. The context of teaching and learning, both mobile and blended at distance, should enable students to translate knowledge from theory to educational and professional practice. According to Bain et al. (2002) students need to be able to connect vocational practise to theoretical knowledge in course literature, supported with a variety of educational and mobile tools, with sufficient time to use them and critically review and discuss the content to achieve educational goals. New media forms can easily be integrated into higher distance education, made possible by enhanced computer technologies, faster internet transmission, and different mobile devices (e.g. Amhag, 2016; 2017; Marin, Jääskelä, Häkkinen, Juntunen, Rasku-Puttonen & Vesisenaho, 2016).

1.1. The Study

The aim of this study was to contribute knowledge about student teachers’ capabilities to reflect on and self-assess their professional development during four school based vocational teacher training courses in one Vocational Teacher Education Program (VTEP) in Sweden, supported by a mobile learning hub (MLH). The MLH provides a mobile and blended prerequisite and activities across various dimensions, including the notion that students can learn anywhere and at any time, and easily switch learning contexts to another scenario, or a variety of scenarios. The MLH was accessible from the student teachers’ laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Each semester had its own folder within the MLH (semester 1, semester 2, semester 3, and semester 4), where the student teachers could download different course documents, literature and instructions, as well as the students’ own lessons plans with pictures and videos (see Figure 1). There were also folders in which they could post their written reflections and self-assessments after their vocational teacher training courses. The MLH also contained a link to an e-meeting system that hosted mobile online face-to-face (F2F) webinars, where students could discuss their written reflections, theoretical readings, and experiences with teaching practice, as well as participating in tutoring and scaffolding delivered by experienced teachers. Student teachers also had access, within the MLH, to a folder containing the recordings of webinar sessions. Links to the recordings of the mobile online F2F webinars were available afterwards for further critical review. Likewise, student teachers could use these recordings as input for their reflections and self-assessments in their log journals. The simple design of this MLH can easily be replicated in any learning platform.

1.2. The Role of MLH

The design of the MLH goes beyond simply adding new teaching, learning, and assessment strategies to an existing course. Instead, the design demonstrates how distance learning can be organized by an MLH to promote school based vocational training in higher education, both mobile and blended at distance. The MLH promotes collaboration and motivates reflection and self-assessment with critical incidents about a situation, incident, or issue encouraging students to find their own ways of learning and to act and think critically and professionally as an integral part of the vocational training courses. This mobile learning concept is called seamless learning. Seamless learning addresses the demand for
Blended Learning Revisited: How it Brought Engagement and Interaction into and Beyond the Classroom
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