

How COVID-19 affected my learning: A Level 4 student's Reflective Account (An edited reflection).

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In this paper I reflect on my personal, academic, and professional capabilities, incorporating home, university life and how COVID-19 affected my learning experience. Knowledge and skills, including teamwork, planning, and observations, will be discussed and practice that promotes children's individual needs will be identified using the Gibbs reflective cycle (1988).

Description

Academic life had been challenging, especially because of COVID-19, as most of it was online which was something I struggled to adapt to when accessing the internet at home. It has had some effect on my university work as I missed parts of my lectures because of internet intermittency. This caused incomplete the out-of-class activities and competencies.

Not being in placement, affected the development of skills such as planning and observations. There was a virtual nursery to help complete the competencies, but I felt I had not underpinned the practice-based knowledge and skills. Despite learning how to plan and create observations through lectures and the virtual nursery resources, I feel there is still room for improvement. I suggest this because placements provide many opportunities to see how practitioners would typically complete them.

However, there had been positives; I appreciate traditional university life can be difficult, let alone virtual learning. I created a group chat for level four students to get to know each other and discuss out-of-class activities and assignments. I did this because I have often thought about how I would feel in their shoes starting a degree during a pandemic.

Some students were unsure how to create an e-portfolio for the module, I recorded videos on how to set up an e-portfolio, create folders and upload work. Students could therefore create their own e-portfolios with ease. I also set up virtual study sessions that students could join to work on their assignments. It seemed to work and feedback from students and lecturers suggested it was beneficial.

Feelings

Starting level four was a new situation for me despite completing my level three at university, I had officially transitioned into higher education during the middle of the pandemic. Halfway through level four I transitioned again to online only due to the COVID-19 spike. This was something I could not prepare for and led to a testing and adaptive time but became hopeful about being back on campus. Van Gennep (1908, cited in Open Sky, 2020) would suggest that I was experiencing the separation phase of his 'rite of passage' as I was leaving the familiar, of on campus teaching and transitioning into a time of learning and growth; finally reaching the third phase of incorporation where I would return to the familiar environment.

Online learning led me to become nervous when expecting assignment feedback as I recently felt disheartened due to being unprepared for semester two. Further feeling annoyed and disappointed not completing the competencies. On reflection, I should have asked the lecturers for help, but I was too nervous. I found other students were feeling similar, which took the pressure off me and allowed for reflection.

Students extended appreciation for guidance I offered. Knowing I could help others whilst building on skills such as competency eight, collaborating with others; through creating a group chat, e-portfolio videos, and study sessions makes me feel accomplished. Parker (2008) suggested that effective teamwork has tangible benefits, those being that students learn better, and it enhances innovation. I feel positive, knowing that I can learn from these experiences and apply them academically and professionally.

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Evaluation

Positive evaluations relate to the key elements that went well, whereas negative evaluations relate to situations that did not go so well or work as well as they should have (Markkanen et al., 2020).

Aspects that did not go well would be online learning and out-of-class activities because of the home environment. Means et al. (2010, cited in Brandenburg et al., 2017) suggested online learning is not straightforward to reflect upon compared to face-to-face learning, as students could encounter barriers. Barriers could be, creating social connections or directing discussions towards learning to gain an understanding. The breakout rooms were not as effective as the proposed intention; this caused further barriers for me. Not being on campus or in placement affected my ability to reflect deeper and gain those academic and professional experiences.

This assignment allowed me to engage and reflect on experiences that did not go so well. Musgrave, Savin-Baden and Stobbs (2017) propose, the key to recognising opportunities that can help optimise experiences is self-awareness. I agree with this, as I had found when writing the assignment, I had become more self-aware, open-minded, and adaptable due to reaching various perspectives. Cottrell (2019) would further agree, as she suggested the brain is highly adaptable so when experimenting with under-used skills, the learner can easily move between the different skills and approaches depending on the task. Therefore, learning overtime can become deeper and more meaningful, developing critical skills as a result. Contrary to the points discussed, there have also been positive experiences, such as assignment results and building relationships through teamwork. This method has improved my professionalism and those initial negative aspects.

My academic coach encouraged me to have a meeting with the lecturer, who marked my work, to discuss the feedback and how to move forward by applying it to the upcoming assignments. Lindon and Trodd (2016) suggested we can learn from mistakes through constructive feedback, which then provides opportunities. These positive experiences built my confidence in my university studies and motivated me for semester two.

When building relationships through teamwork, I unconsciously achieved the performing stage of Tuckman's theory, it has been a steady progression from the forming stage that started in September 2020. Tuckman's theory allowed me to make positive judgements regarding the teamwork that I have been part of. Likewise, I have seen my confidence and interpersonal skills grow. The aforementioned skills have contributed to my professional and academic qualities when working towards the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies.

Analysis

I think the reason certain aspects worked was due to having previous experience within teamwork through employment and previous studies. Through this, I have found areas of strengths and weaknesses. I contributed to the success by creating the group chat and virtual study sessions; or asking questions and challenging something if I was unsure during lectures or liaising later through emails. I noticed other students applied a similar method. Belbin (2010) suggests each person has their strengths and weaknesses when working in teams and by understanding their strengths, it can lead to effective communication between the team and weaknesses offer clues to potential strengths. I think because of the velocity of online learning and the barriers, there has been little chance for us to be pushed out of our comfort zones and challenge those weaknesses.

I am aware other students had comparable issues and resulted in us having to connect to lectures with our phones. Bourdieu helped me understand this situation through concepts of habitus, capital, and field. He suggested that an individual's habitus can influence how a person adapts to situations (Bourdieu, 1977, cited in Fearnley, 2020). I was motivated to be back at university for

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semester two to learn and create social elements but due to lack of preparation and online learning; it has been a source of anxiety. The interplay between my habitus and capital had affected how I engaged within the field (online learning) and the development of my professional identity. Although I have some experience with online learning, I am aware it had affected my engagement and knowledge because of the barriers I encountered.

According to Weiner's (1974) attribution theory, my attributions have affected my future motivations, having learnt from previous errors. When looking at the attribution theory, my locus was internal due to not applying for placements sooner. My stability was variable, due to Covid rates affecting placements, accepting students. The situation was controllable, but this was not met, therefore I have finished level four without a placement. This could impact achieving my graduate competencies. It would be easy for me to suggest the reason I am not in placement is due to external, stable, and uncontrollable attributions because of the course requirements. However, blaming external reasoning does not allow me to grow from my errors but instead, allow me to repeat those errors in the future.

In retrospect, I should have used the virtual nursery more and applied to places earlier, knowing places were limited. I did not see then how much this would affect me by not securing a placement but something I have discovered whilst planning for this assignment. I believe some students had equivalent experiences, which affected us in completing our competencies. However, students who have had previous experience or currently work with early years have been able to complete them by applying previous knowledge. Through reflection, I have been able to understand personal motivations, which have led me to plan in a more principled manner for my academic study and future competencies. I imagine by being mindful of these theories for level five, it will help me progress and prevent reoccurring errors.

This paper showed me what went well, what did not go well, and areas of improvement using the Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle and relevant literature to support my findings. The reflective cycle allowed for methodical thinking about the experiences that have been discussed throughout. I will use them again when using reflective journals because they will help when writing future academic reflective pieces. I have discovered that online learning is not my strongest aspect but being part of a team and helping others is something I enjoy. Reflecting allowed me to process and understand such feelings that I would not have otherwise appreciated. This reflective account changed my insight and allowed me to understand the true value of reflection by discovering how meaningful it is to my academic and professional development. By using this cycle, I believe I have become more self-aware, and I have developed my practice by expanding on skills I have either attained through this assignment or enhanced.

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