Building bridges between the researched and researchers: The use of reflective journals in vocational education research

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Abstract

One of the by-products of the growing level of activity in vocational education and training research has been the increasing demand on workplaces to act as sites for inquiry. In these instances, a common question that researchers need to confront from potential respondents is "What's in it for me and my organisation?" The challenge for researchers is to employ data collection tools that will both assist the process of the data collection and offer the opportunity for benefits to respondents. This paper examines the methodology of using reflective journals as a data collection tool that facilitates the achievement of these twin goals. The rationale for the use of the journals, along with some of the practicalities in managing the data collection process, will be examined. Using a recent study analysing work-based learning as a case study, data evaluating the use of journals and their impact on the respondents and their workplace will be examined and discussed.

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Introduction

Journalling has been widely used in programs for educating a range of professionals including teachers and nurses, particularly in subjects that focus on the development of reflective practitioners. In these cases, the process of journalling is used as a professional development tool to facilitate novice nurses and teachers to extend and deepen their knowledge of their practice, thereby enhancing the quality of information they hold with respect to the ways they might think and act in the complex work environments in which they operate (Bright 1996). Despite its use as a professional development tool in this context, very little attention has been paid to the use of journals as a *research* tool for collecting data in vocational education research.

This paper reports on the use of journalling as a data collection method in a study about work-based learning. It focuses on the way in which the process of journalling was used to collect data in a study of work-based learning in the South Australian Police Department (SAPOL). The research study on work-based learning undertaken with SAPOL focused on an analysis of the move of South Australia Police away from a centralised, Academy-based system of training recruits towards a more integrated model of professional development. In particular, it focused on the work-based learning of Probationary Constables in the eighteen months between Academy graduation and permanent appointment, and the activities of Sergeants, Senior Partners, Field Training Officers, the Probationary Constable Coordinator and Academy Instructors in supporting that learning. The study was undertaken as a collaborative research project between the University of South Australia and South Australia Police, and funded over three years by the Australian Research Council (Harris, White, Simons, Edwards, Edwards & Shanahan 2001).

This paper is in three sections. The first examines journalling as a research tool. The second provides an overview of the use of journals in the research with SAPOL and a description of the way in which journalling was included as one component of the methodology for the study. The third analyses respondents' views and weighs the value of journalling as a research tool.

Journalling as a data collection process in research

As stated previously, journals are mostly associated with the training of professionals such as teachers and nurses. In these instances, professionals use journals as part of a research process to unearth information about their practice in order to better understand their work, the knowledge and theoretical bases that inform this work, the socio-cultural context in which they are operating and the impact this context might have on their practice. In this manner journals can:

- facilitate a deeper understanding of experience, values, practices and actions
- promote the value of insight and intuition in promoting understanding of self and the environment(s) in which one operates
- encourage ownership of values, practices and actions
- reveal hegemonic practices
- reveal new perspectives and open up new avenues for action
- promote growth and confidence in actions
- provide a 'voice' for those who might not be able or choose not to express themselves verbally (Boud 2001, Street 1990)

Journals can act as a tool to facilitate research on oneself and one's practice and, as such, when shared with others can act as a valuable way of collecting research data over a period of time. Used in this way the process of journalling can provide a number of benefits for both researchers and research participants. Through the process of journalling and reflecting, professionals can describe their direct experiences. Journals as a research tool enable the researcher to access the 'rich resource of raw data' derived from the professional lives of individuals and 'expose this for analysis and action' (Street 1990, p. 1). Journals within the research context can take on many forms. Through the process of journalling, research participants record their daily experiences, personal feelings, opinions and reflections on issues that are then shared with the researcher and, in some cases, with other people involved in the research process (Hiemstra 2001, p. 19). A number of different types and formats of journals have been developed. Hiemstra (2001) identifies nine different types of journals which can be used in a variety of ways: learning journals, diaries, reading/dream logs, professional journals, autobiographies/memoirs, reading logs, theory logs and electronic journals. A professional journal, where participants' writing is focused on a specific issue with a specific audience in mind (namely, the researchers), best represents the type of journal used in the research process with personnel from SAPOL.

The process of journalling enables rich descriptive accounts of a phenomenon to be created as a prelude to a process where these are reflected upon and examined critically (Street 1999). The action of writing serves a number of purposes, including making invisible actions and thoughts visible and 'freezing the action' so that it can be examined in more detail (Street 1990, p. 8). When this process of writing is coupled with other processes such as interviews or focus groups, respondents can be encouraged to identify their own actions, practices, values and feelings and hence acquire new information upon which they can base subsequent action. These processes can enlighten respondents to the potentially hegemonic practices that 'contribute to the development and maintenance of …unjust practices' (Street 1990, p. 31). As such, the respondents are invited to participate with the researcher in a collaborative endeavour that seeks to illuminate the phenomenon under scrutiny and to find new ways of acting on the knowledge generated through this process. In other words, research respondents, as far as they are willing to do so, are invited to participate in a learning process where, in addition to providing the researcher with a rich source of data, they are provided with opportunities via a reflective process to further illuminate meanings from their experiences and to develop new ways of acting and thinking (Imel 1992).

This reflective process is one of 'internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective' (Boyd & Fales 1983, p.100). Such a perspective can mean 'a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, requiring a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships' (Schlossberg 1981, p.5). Thus

reflection is more than recollection, as it involves the respondent in sorting through experiences and ideas, developing frameworks for organising and labelling them and assessing the extent to which their own frameworks could be generalised, in this case by writing (Harris 1989, p. 111). The process of reflecting and journalling can therefore be a powerful tool for self-development.

The use of journals in the research process has a number of advantages including its potential to positively affect the professional development of respondents, to enhance self-awareness and to develop new knowledge and skills (Imel 1992, p. 2). Journals, however, can be time-consuming to keep and may involve a degree of personal risk that is unacceptable to respondents. Journals may also raise a number of ethical issues, particularly as the insertion of a researcher into a process of writing that can be intensely private is potentially very intrusive (Fenwick 2001, p. 42). There are issues relating to the boundaries between the professional and the private. As English (2001, p. 30) notes, 'postmodernism accepts and respects disjunctures such as the intersection of the personal and professional'. The knowledge that a journal is to be read by another person creates an imbalance in the power relationship that can lead the respondent to feel that they are being personally 'judged' in some way. Fenwick (2001), citing Foucault (1980) and Usher and Edwards (1995), alert researchers to the oppressive potential that can exist in relationships where writing is used to make the personal visible. The development of relationships of respect and trust between researchers and those respondents keeping journals is critical to the ethical use of journals in the research process. Respect for the respondents' interests and beneficence (promoting good), reinforced through processes such as assurances of confidentiality and boundary-setting, need to be well thought out in the design process if the interests of research respondents are to be promoted and protected. The ways in which the researchers grappled with these issues in the use of journals for the study on work-based learning is described in the next section of this paper.

Work-based learning in SAPOL

In South Australia, decisions to reduce the time that police recruits spend within an Academy training environment – from three years in the 1960s and 1970s, to 50 weeks in the 1980s, and to 38 weeks and then 26 weeks in the 1990s (Stretton & White 1997, p.1) – have led to a re-thinking of the training model. A model entitled the 'Constable Training Program', consisting of two continuous phases of Trainee Constable Development in the Academy for 26 weeks and Probationary Constable Development in the workplace for between 18 months and two years to achieve the required national competency standards was developed and implemented with the first intake in the 1997-1998 year. As part of the implementation of this model, research processes to analyse and monitor this significant change were established. The research aimed to explore the impact of the new professional development model for policing. The key features of this model differentiating it from previous models within SAPOL included shifts in:

- approach away from a reactive towards a more proactive framework
- thinking on constable development away from a predominantly off-job, Academy-based training program to an overall two-year integrated on- *and* off-job program
- the purpose of the Academy component from preparing probationers to be "competent" to enabling them to be "work ready" and able to continue their development of competence in the workplace

- assessment responsibilities and approaches, both in terms of where (in both Academy and workplace) and how assessment was to be undertaken (against national competencies and using a Workplace Assessment Record Book)
- The research process was designed to examine the experience and process of change as the Constable Training Program was implemented with successive intakes of probationary constables over a period of fourteen months. In designing the overall approach to collecting data, the researchers recognised that there were four key factors that needed to be taken into account in a study of this nature:
- the multiple perspectives on change. Thus the researchers sought the views of as many different actors as possible. (The key issue here was how many could realistically be included given the constraints of time and cost.)
- the significance of time when studying incremental and developing change. Thus the researchers designed the study with cycles of data-gathering. (The key issue here was to strike a balance such that participants did not suffer research fatigue.)
- the reality that change is 'holistic', and not simply a matter of direct cause and effect in a specific area. Thus the researchers sought to take into consideration the influence of organisational culture and specific work contexts
- the shift to work-based learning that may be quite different in nature and strength of impact for different participants. Thus the researchers were concerned to understand the reported experiences of many different actors through multiple means.

The configuration of the data sources and instruments for the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Research data sources and instruments

pants and data collection methods	Numbers of participants at the three points in time*		
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
ionary Constables stionnaire view nal		(dividual interviews)	(roup)
Partners stionnaire view			
ants stionnaire view nal		(dividual interviews)	(roup)
raining Officers / ionary Constables nator view nal		(dividual interviews)	(roup)
my Instructors view			

* Time 1 = approx. one month after completing Academy training; Time 2 = approx. six - seven months after completing
Academy training; and Time 3 = approx. twelve - fourteen months after completing Academy training

In addition to content analysis of SAPOL documents and Academy curricula, the key sources of data were:

- Probationary Constables – the focus was their experiences of work-based learning over time
- their Senior Partners – the focus was how they facilitated work-based learning and their use of work-based learning in the work setting
- their Sergeants – the focus was how they managed and supported work-based learning, and how they conceptualised work-based learning in their work setting
- Field Training Officers and the Probationary Constables Coordinator – the focus was their overview of work-based learning, and their experiences of working with the Probationary Constables, Sergeants and Senior Partners in managing the process
- Academy Instructors – the focus was how they represented the workplace to the Probationary Constables and in what ways they prepared them for the 'world of work'

The journals were a key component of the data collection for the Probationary Constables, Sergeants and the Field Training Officers / Probationary Constable Coordinator. Each of these three groups of respondents was asked to participate in a process of writing a journal over a period of 14 months.

Each group of respondents was provided with a hard-backed, A5-size book that was covered in soft vinyl. The front of the book had 'Notebook' written across it in gold lettering and inside, behind the front cover of the journal, a piece of paper had been pasted in describing the 'journal ground rules', adapted from a study conducted by Coombe Lodge (Ralph 1995)(see Figure 1 for an excerpt of the ground rules in the Probationary Constables' journals). These were designed to provide respondents with some prompts as to what was required of them in relation to the journal. Each of these sets of ground rules varied according to the specific group of respondents. Probationary Constables were asked to focus on their learning in the workplace; Sergeants on their role in supporting learners in their workplaces; and Field Training Officers / Probationary Constable Coordinator on their efforts to support SAPOL staff in structuring learning and assessment in the workplace. On the right hand page facing these ground rules were pasted some more guidelines to assist in keeping a journal (Ralph 1995)(see Figure 2 for guidelines in the Sergeants' journals).

Figure 1: Ground rules pasted in the journals (example: Probationary Constables)

JOURNAL GROUND RULES

Purpose

The aim of this journal is to assist you in assembling a series of personal observations, reflections and analyses. These will be used as part of a process aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the learning you undertake in the workplace.

Confidentiality

Your journal will be seen only by the research team and no one else unless you wish to share the contents with others, or you agree that the research team can quote identified elements in the research report.

Scope

There is no expectation regarding depth, breadth or detail. It is not a competition to produce the greatest journal in SAPOL. The idea is to learn about learning in the workplace and approaches to learning which will help you in your role within SAPOL.

Number of journal entries

While there are 'no hard and fast rules' about the number of journal entries, we suggest that you aim to write a minimum of one entry per week.

As part of the process, respondents were also asked to participate in an interview about six to seven months after they had started the journalling process and a focus group after they had been journalling for about 14 months. Respondents were sent a review sheet to assist them in preparing for the interview and focus group. The sheet asked the respondents to jot down notes about how the experience of keeping a journal had been for them, the influence of the journal on their work associated with learning in the workplace (as a Probationary Constable, Sergeant or Field Training Officer / Probationary Constable Coordinator), the particular issues they had to contend with as part of their role and the learning that had taken place as a result of their experiences. These review sheets were then brought along to the interview and focus group and used as a catalyst for discussion.

The approach to journalling used in the research process was designed to accomplish two intersecting objectives. It was purposefully designed to contribute to the professional development of the SAPOL staff who participated in the research and, in addition, to provide the researchers with a rich source of data on work-based learning over time.

Figure 2: A guide to the process of keeping a journal (example: Sergeants)

A GUIDE TO THE PROCESS OF KEEPING THE JOURNAL				
Focus	* work practices used to support learners in the workplace * participating in assessment of learning in the workplace * the process of decision-making and problem solving used to support learners			
Record	* observations * insights * myths *anecdotes	* problems * challenges * feelings * positives and negatives	* reflections * puzzles * 'war stories'	* issues * ideas * suggestions
Using	*words * anything	* diagrams	* flow charts	* tables
Occasionally	* review * evaluate	* analyse	* summarise	* synthesise
Once during the period individual interview	* collate observations * share them with one other member of the research team in an			
Once during the period	* collate observations * share them with other Sergeants who are keeping journals in a focus group facilitated by a member of the research team			

The processes used illustrate the ways in which researchers and respondents might be brought together in a collaborative partnership that seeks, as far as possible, to ameliorate some of the power imbalances that can exist between the researcher and the researched. The iterative nature of the data collection enabled a two-way flow of information to be established between researchers and respondents. This provided SAPOL staff with the

necessary encouragement to remain committed to the task of journalling and the opportunity for the researchers to support the process of reflection by encouraging dialogue on issues that were the focus of journal entries.

Evaluating the use of journals as a research tool

Managing the process of journalling presented the researchers with considerable challenges. Most significantly, conscious efforts needed to be made to encourage SAPOL staff to write. This was particularly important in the early stages when many respondents were feeling a little uncertain about what was required of them and a little nervous about sharing their early attempts at writing. Telephone contact was used to provide encouragement and support throughout the process with initial contact being made on a more frequent basis (once a week in some cases).

The interview conducted at about the half way point during the journalling process also provided the researchers with the opportunity to offer further encouragement for the process and allowed the respondents to 'showcase' their writing in a safe environment. The focus groups at the conclusion of the journalling process provided a public space where respondents could meet others who had shared the process and de-brief their experiences. Both the interviews and focus groups acted as catalysts for the writing process and provided opportunities for the researchers to gauge progress and offer feedback to enhance the quality of the data. While most of the SAPOL staff acknowledged that it did become difficult to maintain their enthusiasm for their journals on at least some occasions and that the process of writing was sometimes time-consuming, all were unequivocal in their assertion that the process of journalling was well worth their effort. The following examples are illustrative of some of the outcomes of the journalling process.

For Probationary Constables, the journals provided a 'safe place' where their mistakes could be re-examined and issues thought through in privacy. This process enabled them to 'get things off their chests' and to 'put things in perspective'. Most significantly, the journals became a site where Probationary Constables could examine their mistakes and could think about them 'in a safe environment'. The process of writing also appeared to have a cathartic effect for many Probationary Constables in enabling them to 'clarify their thinking' and 'to put some distance' between themselves and some of the 'messy jobs' they were confronted with during the course of their work (for example, a sudden death). Journals were sites where feelings were examined, reactions were revisited and Probationary Constables developed 'a greater notice' of the events and how they unfolded over time. In short, the process of reflection on their actions aided and extended their experiences of learning in the workplace.

One Probationary Constable ventured that writing was valuable to him because he 'learned from *my own* experiences rather than from others'. It was not that the experiences of others were not valuable. All the Probationary Constables believed that the experiences of their colleagues were central to the process of facilitating their learning. There was, however, something significant in the way that the journal created spaces for the Probationary Constables to bring together their experiences and to 'make sense' of these in quiet and solitude.

Probationary Constables' journals also opened up the richness of work-based learning as it unfolded over time. For one probationer an early diary entry read:

I gave a 603 today over the radio. It was the first time I did it with confidence and no mistakes. I bet though it will not take long for my confidence to drop again. As a probationary constable, confidence levels go up and down continuously…

The very next day, the entry proclaimed:

> Well now, my confidence has dropped dramatically. I knew I had to type an AP today, so last night I did a rough copy. I wanted to try and do it on my own. Anyway, I finished it and gave it to my partner in the incident and he re-did the whole bloody lot. I probably looked more stupid attempting to have a go. I know I need more practise, but I hate feeling so incompetent.

One year later this person was able to write, "I dealt with the drunk very well. I was totally in charge and it felt great", and in the final entry two months on, the person concluded:

> Confidence played a big part in my probie period. At times I felt so low that I did not want to go to work, however, there were times that I did feel confident. I believe that a person does not feel totally confident for a few years.

Sergeants' journals were notable for their emphasis on the value of journalling in making visible the work of facilitating and managing learning in the workplace. Most Sergeants reflected on their enhanced awareness of the quantity of learning that can potentially take place at work and their growing ability to find 'spaces' in work process where learning might be encouraged and supported. One Sergeant wrote of his growing awareness of how learning can emerge spontaneously out of work and attributed this to the fact that the process of journalling had 'forced' him to look so that he would have something to write about. Another Sergeant wrote about the impact the journal had on his approaches to assessment and the way in which the writing process 'sets out what he had achieved' and highlighted the type of feedback he needed to get from the Probationary Constables in order to make judgements about their progress.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the data collection process confirmed the value of journalling as a research tool. From the perspective of the researchers, the journals furnished a large amount of rich data that illuminated the multi-faceted nature of work-based learning. Reading the journals highlighted the human dimension of the experience of work-based learning and the important part that emotion plays in learning. The journals also highlighted the complexity of work-based learning and how it can provide many contradictory and negative experiences that present considerable challenges to personnel. Just as the appearance of a swan gliding effortlessly across the water hides the activity underneath the surface, so too the process of journalling provided the researchers with significant insights into the hidden world of work-based learning and the effort and emotion that sometimes accompanies it. The process of journalling also heightened the researchers' awareness of the limitations and problems that can arise in the public space that is the workplace learning environment, and the contribution that privacy and solitude can make to the learning process.

From the perspective of 'the researched', two major outcomes were of note. The first of these related to the high value that SAPOL staff themselves placed on the ways in which journalling fostered their thinking and reflecting on their work and on learning. This was greatly valued in a work environment that was often highly stressful and opportunities for the space to think were at a premium. The second related to the way in which the journals provided a useful record of experiences over time that could be looked back over and used to promote further learning through reflection. 'Reclaiming the historical self' (Street 1990, p. 25) enabled SAPOL staff to (re)discover their tacit knowledge and comprehend more fully how they had become the worker that they are. As the stories of professional development were told, the respondents often would recognise how their past experiences (including those that preceded their employment in SAPOL) had shaped their present experiences.

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