Reflection in Transit:
Navigating a Model for Experiential Learning

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Abstract:

In this essay, we reflect on the experience of the subway emergency preparedness exercise, a large-scale mock emergency that was also framed as an experiential learning opportunity for students, faculty, and staff at York University. In our role as educational developers, our aim in taking part in the exercise as simulated train passengers was to gain holistic, participant-centric insights into the experiential learning process rather than solely knowing about this experience and considering what opportunities it may generate from a course design perspective. We debriefed our experience using Ryan's 4 Rs, an expanded model of reflection, to explore the practical applications and limitations of the 4 Rs as a pedagogical framework designed to elicit and scaffold reflective responses. Thus, we provide a description of the process we deliberately used to transform experience into insights, moving from surface-level recall to probing deeper connections, using excerpts from our own reflections as evidence in support of the model or otherwise. We conclude by highlighting the risk of adopting a model swiftly without carefully considering the ongoing role of the instructor in debriefing experience as well as prompting, supporting, and facilitating reflection.

Key Words:

levels of reflection, framework for reflection, reflective process, experiential learning, scaffolding learning, reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, reconstructing.

Introduction

In this essay, we report on our experience of the subway emergency exercise, a large-scale mock emergency that took place at York University that was also framed as an experiential learning opportunity for students, faculty, and staff. Both educational developers, we volunteered as train passengers, hoping that this shared experience would provide us with concrete insights for integrating reflection into experiential teaching and learning. The subway exercise gave us the opportunity to explore reflection not as a static, polished product of learning situated in a certain time or location, but rather as a fluid process enabling ongoing meaning making from experience. As a pedagogical tool, what would the notion of reflection look like?

Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984) offers some insights into how this experience might inform our thinking, but we also probed further into the literature in our search to label and scaffold somewhat abstract cognitive processes. In doing so, we were drawn toward Mary Ryan's (2013) framework for its ability to scaffold different levels of reflection. Inspired by Bain et al. (2002), she proposes a model of reflection recognizing that recalling an experience, while necessary, is insufficient for meaningful learning. Moving along a continuum of cognitive complexity, Ryan's framework considers reflection as a series of stages, from Reporting and Responding, through to Relating, Reasoning, and Reconstructing. Navigating through each stage explicitly scaffolds different levels of understanding, moving from surface-level recall to probing deeper connections to give shape and scope to what Ryan (2013) aptly notes is far from an intuitive skill.

What follows is our attempt to debrief our experience of the subway emergency exercise using this model. For each level, we briefly describe what the stage consists of and highlight some insights gained from our reflective process with excerpts from our responses as supporting evidence. Although we recognize that our ability to reflect critically is likely more developed than our students', we thought that testing Ryan's model as a means of organizing and articulating our learning process would help us better understand the mental gymnastics required to transform the recollection of an experience into an insightful learning opportunity. This may, in turn, equip us with practical, effective strategies for developing teaching and learning tools to better serve their intended purposes in supporting deep, meaningful processing.

Applying Ryan's model of reflection to our response to the subway emergency exercise

Level 1: Reporting and Responding

Reporting and responding is about noticing aspects of the experience, forming opinions, and identifying an initial emotional response.

As one may expect, some reflection in action took place during the exercise. We concerned ourselves with the unfolding of events, from the painstaking screening process to the orderliness of the crowd descending to the subway platform, entering the trains, and quietly waiting for something to happen, all the while expecting that at some point we would experience a sense of emergency and witness emotional responses – perhaps our own – to the simulated emergency. Nothing of that sort happened,

however, and much of our initial, surface-level reflection after the event involved reporting on the salient events we experienced and observed. After the event, we asked ourselves: What do I remember most about the experience?

Geneviève oriented her response towards towards the chronology of happenings:

…we exited the train through one end and onto a ramp, walked on the tracks, climbed up a few stairs and made it back to the station. Once in the station, we were asked to wait in another train and later were prompted to exit the station. A moment later, one staff person, looking very puzzled, asked the passengers why we were leaving. Clearly the evacuation had not been planned that way and a responder ordered us to go back in.

Lisa focused on her dual role as a volunteer and as an educator, leading her to feel overwhelmed by the situation:

I found myself concurrently observing how the event was being run while also working to be present as a participant for the benefit of the exercise. It was interesting to take note of how the exercise was run – it is such a large-scale activity that depends on so many people and moving parts to be successful.

In both cases, much of the focus was on observing the emergency response unfolding. Perhaps to ground herself, Lisa oriented her response towards how the emergency response was deployed. Geneviève's account was very much sequential, and her somewhat unfocused retelling left her wondering what there was to learn from this experience. At this stage, neither of us quite identified a focal point in the retelling. To circumvent this shortcoming, Ryan (2013) suggests that scaffolding may be needed to help learners identify a critical issue that can serve as the basis for a deeper analysis in the following levels of reflection.

Level 2: Relating

At this stage, the learner is prompted to make connections between the experience and her skills, knowledge, and/or own prior experiences. By asking ourselves how this experience connected with our past experiences and current knowledge, we sought to explicitly articulate linkages between the subway emergency exercise and what we had experienced before.

Our move along the continuum to Relating felt rather natural, as we considered this experience against others that we had participated in as commuters, as students, and more saliently as instructors and educational developers. For Lisa, the familiarity of the situation was evident:

As we descended the stairs into the station, I was immediately struck by how many times I had done something similar over the years. I take the subway almost every day, but this experience felt different. I don't often walk into a subway station anticipating an emergency, but I couldn't help feeling some sense of foreboding (at least initially). I also found myself thinking back on being an event organizer or facilitator of a learning experience. How did I, in the past, manage expectations of my participants and provide them with information to have an effective learning experience?

For Geneviève, it was the realization that the experience had not met her expectations:

I had anticipated the exercise to replicate a real-life emergency, but the simulation turned out to be predictable and orderly. As a participant, I felt disappointed by the experience. It occurred to me that everyone was much more relaxed than any of my fellow subway commuters on our way to work! This thought prompted me to think about previous contexts in which I had designed activities that had failed to meet the intended learning outcomes.

Initially, we began considering how this experience differed from the schemata we had about taking the subway as we searched for clues that we were in a simulated emergency situation. We were still rather focused on our own, personal experiences and prior knowledge, even when comparing these feelings to what we assumed previous students may have felt after expectations for their own learning may or may not have been realized. Interestingly, we both started to relate the incident to our professional role. Though this was not an explicit move, it was in part triggered by the instrumental motivation we had in participating in this exercise in the first place.

The vague feeling of apprehension we both experienced as we anticipated an 'emergency' to unfold was tied to assumptions we had made about the situation – the unpredictability of an emergency situation as well as what a simulation was, at least in our mind, supposed to simulate. It was now clear to us that we had to some extent misconstrued the point of a fake emergency – it was not so much about enacting an actual emergency as it was a way to provide the necessary context for the response team to test its emergency management plan.

As Lisa pointed out, our role as educators is in part about managing learner expectations. But how do we prepare them for 'what is not'? How can we help them reframe their learning when things do not go as planned, or as anticipated? The absence of focal point during the emergency became our critical incident, a fundamental issue that prompted us to reflect on parallel issues in the classroom.

Level 3: Reasoning

At this level, the previously articulated personal account sets the stage for an academic response to emerge by referring to and connecting with relevant concepts. It took some time to move from our emotional or personal reactions to a more theory-driven response. Our question prompted us to identify relevant threads from our practices and articulate the extent to which we were able to anchor our thoughts in educational constructs explored in evidenced-informed conversations: What explicit connections to teaching and learning theory did this experience trigger for us, if any?

Geneviève started to think about the divergent perspectives teacher and student may have about what there is of value to learn:

This experience made me consider the teacher-centred vs. student-centred approaches to learning in an unexpected way. […] When designing experiential learning activities, instructors tend to assume that these will be relatable and expect critical reflection to unfold naturally. Learners are prompted to relate experience to their own set of values, knowledge, skills, and experiences and to

construct their understanding of concepts and theories based on personal experience, but how can we instructors claim to know in advance what they will learn? […] As Coulson and Harvey (2013) aptly point out, the possible gap between our expectations and our students' experience may have to do with how intentional and explicit our teaching interventions are.

For Lisa, the parallel between how she navigated through the experience and more abstract representation of experiential learning was evident:

> …I was reminded of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, particularly the intimate connections between a concrete experience and how it inspires (or inhibits) abstract conceptualization where students begin making new, novel connections between this experience and what they are learning in class. It was fascinating to see some of these principles 'come to life' in the exercise – different from simply reading about an emergency in a subway station, experiencing it made me think about how, for example, the theory of critical care in nursing may be applied to the active, on the spot treatment of (simulated) patients.

We began to consider how this experience connected with the theories that inform our work. Geneviève focused on the potential gap between teacher intentions and actual learning, understanding that her own assumptions may lead her to believe that a certain learning activity will be relatable when it is not. Lisa pointed out that 'reading about an emergency' and living through a simulated one may in fact trigger very different connections (or lack therefore). Particularly, a concrete experience that does not meet expectations at least minimally could inhibit abstract conceptualizations, as it may be insurmountable to relate and reason something that is absent.

Given that reflection questions typically associated with *Reasoning* explicitly prompted us to make linkages between experience and theory, it is not surprising that we both referenced the literature as well as our practice as further evidence to produce discipline-focused reflection. Despite this motivation to link theory to practice, we remained rather general and surface-level in our analysis. This realization caused us to ask ourselves what would be needed to bring learners beyond immediate or obvious connections. We are thus reminded, once again, of the importance of strategic teaching interventions that can "support learners to progressively develop their skills and encourage self-regulation" (Coulson and Harvey, 2013, p. 403). Short of that, learners run the risk of formulating interesting if abstract ideas only supported by sweeping statements referencing the literature.

Level 4: Reconstructing:

When reconstructing, new insights are integrated into the learner's schema or used to make a plan for action. This level of reflection is sometimes seen as the pinnacle of experiential learning – not only making meaningful, novel connections but also considering the practical implications of these new insights. We asked ourselves: How will this experience inform my work moving forward?

For Lisa, this reflective exercise reminded her that critically reflecting on her practice as an educator was important, too, in trying to foster engaged and critical learning:

This exercise has inspired me to think about how I may continue to encourage faculty to debrief on experiences, both with their students and for themselves. We are often so focused on facilitating engaging and meaningful learning experiences, that we may put aside our own reflection to support our students. This certainly isn't to say that we don't critically reflect, but we don't always have or take time to pause, reflect, and try out some of our new insights. […] Going forward, I hope to continue to offer insights and strategies for how this could be done alongside, not in spite of, our continually busy schedules.

Geneviève held on to an earlier thought about intended vs. unintended learning outcomes, the pace and space in which learners move along the reflective continuum, and whether Ryan's model will be a way forward in her practice:

Although reflective learning is, ultimately, transformative learning, I ought to recognize that not every experience will be transformative. Even when an impactful experience occurs, the learning may not necessarily be confined to curricular content or intended learning outcomes, and it may happen only later, at the learner's own pace. We may need to scale back our own expectations and think hard about how we structure reflection in our classrooms. I am moving toward the stance that summative assessment has little to no place in this model. How can we account for variability in pace, depth and breadth? I think part of the answer lies with a framework that recognizes these factors are at play, so I am looking forward to working with faculty on piloting and implementing some version of Ryan's levels of reflection.

We have only begun considering how to infuse this model into activities that already exist – how can we better take advantage of the experiences that students may already have access to in order to create space and motivation for the complex cognitive exercise of reflection? This could be, for example, offering multiple opportunities for reflection over time rather than relying on a single exercise. This could also be multiple forms of reflection, including written, spoken, and performance. Just as there are a multitude of teachers, topics, and learning preferences, so too are there multiple means to integrate this model into the variety of experiences students will have throughout their time at the institution. In planning our next steps, we have a sense of direction but are by no means close to having a concrete action plan.

Final thoughts

It was evident from this subway emergency exercise that a learning experience is much more than a well-coordinated event. The circumstances, context, and even instructions designed to create a well-organized experience can easily take precedence over designing intentional opportunities for reflective learning. This is certainly not to say that a well-organized event or classroom is unnecessary, but it does raise valuable questions as to how the experiences we facilitate are subject to a myriad of assumptions and variables that offer surprising, unexpected insights we may not have, and cannot plan for. The organization of such events also prompts us to consider how best to offer time and space for critical reflection. We were fortunate enough to have had time to reflect together before, during, and immediately after the event, as well as in the days that followed, but instructors are often faced with competing demands that

make it challenging to infuse meaningful reflection into their courses. Perhaps we must also consider what reflection can look like inside the already full and complex happenings within our classrooms.

Our attempts at using Ryan's framework to organize our reflective process and to act as a possible strategy for incorporating reflection into a course led to, admittedly, mixed success. We had initially considered how our reflections might fit within this model - could we see, for example, the more academic description of each stage somehow mirrored in how we discussed our reactions to engaging in this unique experience? What we found, however, was that using this model to frame reflective activities may run the risk of shifting our focus away from developing valuable skills in critical reflection. In other words, we may find ourselves 'reflecting to the model' much as we may sometimes be 'teaching to the test'.

This framework, however, deserves greater attention as a means to design a curriculum that explicitly teaches students what reflection can look like and how it may be a meaningful part of their learning experience. Inside our own classrooms, this model has inspired us to consider reflection as far more than instructing students to sequentially report on past events and then move to extract deeper meanings from these experiences. We are reminded, for example, that such a framework does not replace the integral role of the instructor in prompting, supporting, and facilitating reflection as an iterative process that may require several rounds of reporting and relating before greater meanings can emerge. This model, and the list of reflective prompts or questions it offers, best serves its purpose when embedded within thoughtful classroom practices that make room for meaningful dialogue between learners and facilitator.

Ryan's framework considers the 'what next?' or 'now what?' questions – where and how might the learning occur after students have engaged in a learning experience inside or outside of the classroom? Other theories of experiential learning and reflective thinking present important conceptual understandings of these processes, but, expanding on Kolb's valuable conceptualization of reflection as cyclical, Ryan's framework offers a practical means of visualizing what these concepts could look like in our classrooms. The action verbs associated with each stage (e.g. reporting, relating, reasoning) can guide us to pedagogical interventions and assessment strategies as measurable, behavioural ideals. For example, knowing what is or was most salient for students who engaged in a particular experience, more critical reflection may occur in the later stages of Ryan's framework through an intentional focus on integrating course concepts into discussions, projects, and assignments. Used as a fluid, developmental model rather than a rigid how-to guide to reflection, this framework offers opportunities to support students in developing crucial skills in reflection, critical thinking, and communication. Understanding what reflection is, and what it means to do it well, offers our students multiple possibilities for insight, transition, and transformation.

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