

# INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELDS: THE ROLE OF REFLECTION IN ‘LEARNING HOW TO LEARN’\*

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**ABSTRACT:** In experiential learning, on-field experience needs to be processed consciously in order for learning to take place. Reflection plays a crucial role by providing a bridge between practical experience and conceptualization. Despite being a protected environment, university traineeship is a form of experiential learning that offers students a chance to learn from the fields and reflect on a possible future profession. In this paper we present and discuss a research project whose goal is the development of a methodology to educate trainees’ reflective thinking and writing.

**KEYWORDS:** university traineeship, experiential learning, reflective thinking, reflective writing, reflective practitioner.

## 1. Introduction

No one is born fully-formed: it is  
through self-experience in the world  
that we become what we are.  
(Paulo Freire)

In experiential learning, personal experience is the focal point for learning, bringing «life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts» and providing «a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process» (Kolb 1984: 21). Experience alone, however, is not sufficient for learning. For learning to take place, any in-the-field experience needs to be processed consciously.

Reflection plays a crucial role by providing a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualization (Schön 1983). It helps to activate a circular process between thought and action, essential to avoid acting in a mechanical way based on habit or merely applying theories and procedures (Dewey 1933).

In the Education Science courses at the Sapienza University of Rome, traineeship is considered an essential formative step for stu-

\* The present article is the result of joint work and reflection. However, Anna Salerni is specifically responsible for Paragraphs 1, 3 and Silvia Zanazzi for Paragraphs 2, 4, 5.

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dents' personal and professional growth, as well as a valuable chance to integrate knowledge acquired in formal contexts at a theoretical level with skills developed in professional settings (Salerni, Sposetti, Szpunar 2014). Despite being a somehow 'protected' environment, university traineeship is a form of experiential learning that offers students a chance to learn from the fields and think about a potential future profession. Trainees participate in concrete projects and learn, along with the help of tutors, to reflect critically, developing the necessary competence to enter the world of work and professionals.

We all acknowledge the importance of reflection. However, we should not assume that individuals are naturally born with the ability to reflect. More realistically, reflection requires adequate knowledge and skills, as well as practice and exercise (Harris *et al.* 2010) to analyse facts in depth and adopt new perspectives. As Mortari (2003) emphasizes, we really learn only when we can attribute meaning to our experience.

A final traineeship report is required in our Education Science courses to obtain academic credit. Beyond the formal requirement, we ask students to produce a report because writing about experiences is recognized in the literature as a useful tool to enhance reflective practice. In fact, writing the report obliges trainees to re-elaborate their experience, hopefully activating a process of «reflection on action, from a distance» (Schön 1983) that fosters a growth of understanding and knowledge (Salerni, Sposetti, Szpunar 2014). Along the way, academic tutors recommend that trainees regularly keep logbooks<sup>1</sup> during their field experience, since these increase learners' awareness and provide material upon which to reflect afterwards (Gibbs 2013).

As we said, writing can be a way to fuel reflective practice by re-processing and interpreting experience. According to Moon (2006), there are three types of writing with respect to the level of reflection displayed. Based on her classification and on other contributions (Kember *et al.* 2000; Mezirow 1991), we developed our own definition to use for the analysis of final reports:

- *Descriptive writing* is merely centred on 'what happened' and contains few reflective elements. There is little attempt to focus on some selected issues, giving similar 'weight' to all topics. Generally, stories are told from only one point of view. Ideas are linked by a sequence of facts rather than by meaning; there might be references to emotional reactions, but they are not explored in depth.

<sup>1</sup> Logbooks need to be kept daily. The trainees should briefly note what happens and what catches their attention every day, so as to have material for reflection later on. Therefore, logbooks are different from learning journals, which are usually a weekly requirement.

The students do not seem to have any doubts or critical incidents that they want to bring up for discussion, nor do they seem to question their behaviour and actions in any way.

- *Descriptive writings with some reflections* tend to be more focused and signal points for further reflection: beyond an account of ‘what happened’, there are doubts, questions and issues to be discussed. However, this type of writing still shows little analysis of the events: the reflection is not deep enough to let learning happen. There are statements showing awareness about learning, but they are very generic and often sound rhetorical. The students do not show sufficient ability to ‘distance’ themselves from the concrete situations and look at them critically.
- *Reflective writing* contains some descriptions, but it focuses on some relevant aspects to be analysed in depth. In this type of writing, one might be able to appreciate the existence of several alternative points of view on the same facts. There is a certain ‘distance’ from the events, a willingness to be critical and to question one’s own actions and those of others. Emotions are recognized, and so is their significance and impact on behaviour. The students reflect on their learning referring to theoretical knowledge (to know), practical knowledge (to know how) and behaviour (how to be). Connections between formal and informal learning are established and explained. There are comments and reflections on how field experience might impact future career choices and why.
- *Critical reflection*. This type of writing contains reflections that might lead to a change in one’s basic assumptions and ‘frames of reference’. Mezirow (1991) defined this as «premise reflection». This is a very deep and ‘transformative’ re-elaboration work that implies a revision of premises deriving from previous learning and its ‘consequences’, both in terms of meanings and behaviour. This type of reflection might also be related to the concept of «deutero-learning» (Bateson 1972), which challenges one’s existing learning framework as well as one’s mental assumptions. This is a superior level of learning, a meta-cognition process that concerns ‘learning to learn’ rather than simply learning an object or a specific skill. We are fully aware that critical reflection might be very rare in students’ reports, since we deal with very young people (around 20 years old) who are in many cases experiencing the work environment for the first time. Despite this, we know from our class discussions that some students have the ability to reflect critically on the purpose and meaning of education in society, raising philosophical issues that might be ‘challenged’ and investigated through experience. Therefore, we consider that there is the possibility of finding pieces of critical reflection in their reports.

We strongly believe that a traineeship model based on reflection contributes to preparing reflective practitioners, able to engage in a process of continuous learning. Since reflective practice can be a very effective source of personal and professional development (Schön 1983, 1987), and given that writing on experience fosters reflection on it, we think it is important to invest time and energy in improving the final traineeship reports in terms of 'reflective content'. In fact, in this paper, we present and discuss a research project carried out during the academic year of 2015–2016 in a research lab on the theme of traineeship. In our Education Science courses at Sapienza, in fact, first-year students are required to take an Educational Research Lab class, while traineeship involvement begins in the second year. The goal of our work was, initially, to have an assessment of the trainees' capability to evaluate and report their traineeship experience in written form, going beyond a mere description of 'what happened'. Then, when we realized that reflective writing was so lacking in most of the reports, we started discussing a strategy to improve them. We began a journey whose destination is the development of a 'methodology' to educate reflective thinking and train reflective writing. Like any research process, this is a cycle where provisional results generate further questions, becoming new material for subsequent steps.

## 2. Theory

In traditional 'teacher-directed' approaches based on lessons, learning takes place mainly at an intellectual level. The students are passive recipients of information, often unaware of their own emotional responses to the objects of learning. According to more recent theories of learning, this 'sterile' approach can lead to an inadequate application of knowledge in authentic real-life occasions and work contexts. A very clear example is provided by Hobbs (1992) in the nursing sphere:

If student nurses or doctors are taught about how to encounter dying patients or their relatives and the information is imparted to them in a 'teacher-directed' mode, they do not have the necessary opportunity to reflect on their own thoughts and possible fears of death and examine such deep feelings together with their peers in the first place. In such cases they do not learn how their own fears of death might affect the quality of their work with such people (Hobbs 1992: XIV).

In fact, experts in learning have argued that theoretical concepts will become part of an individual's knowledge only after he/she has experienced them meaningfully at an emotional level.

The theoretical framework of our project is the vast corpus of works on experiential learning, from which emerges a new perspective on work-based learning and the creation of knowledge in general. While more traditional approaches give primary emphasis to the acquisition of knowledge, brick after brick as if a wall were being built, the experiential learning viewpoint sees knowledge as a flexible network of ideas and feelings (Kolb 1984). Based on this assumption, learning is not the mere accumulation of knowledge, but entails changing assumptions and conceptions, transforming oneself in the process (Mezirow 1991). A fundamental proposition in the experiential learning theory is that learning is a holistic process which fully involves human beings: thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving are all integrated functions (Kolb 1984). In this view, learning becomes the major process of human adaptation to the world, occurring in all settings, from school to the workplace, as well as in personal relationships and everyday activities: it is a continuous, lifelong process that involves transactions between the person and the environment. As Dewey (1938) wrote, experience influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose, since every experience changes to some extent the objective conditions under which subsequent experiences takes place. In this respect, he made a distinction between educative and miseducative experiences, the latter having «the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience» (Dewey 1938: 25).

If we critically analyse the three most influential theories on experiential learning (Dewey 1938; Lewin 1946; Piaget 1971) we can easily find similarities between them. The three models<sup>2</sup> taken together form a unique perspective on learning (Kolb 1984), conceived as a process rather than in terms of outcome: «ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience» (Kolb 1984: 26). Consequently, knowledge continuously emerges from experience, implying that «all learning is relearning» (Kolb 1984: 26), since everyone faces new experiences drawing on ideas and knowledge stemming from previous ones. According to Kolb, to be effective, learners need four kinds of abilities: concrete experience («involving themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences»), reflective observation («reflecting on and observing their experiences from many perspectives»), abstract conceptualization («creating concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories») and active experimentation («using these theories to make decisions

<sup>2</sup> Lewin's model of Action Research and Laboratory Training; Dewey's model of Developmental Learning; Piaget's model of Learning and Cognitive Development (Kolb 1984).

and solve problems») (Kolb 1984: 30). Thus, the learner can alternate between being an actor or an observer, going from active involvement to analytical detachment: he/she needs to act and reflect, and to be concrete and theoretical at the same time. This model shows very clearly the relationship between experiential learning and reflection, a pillar concept in the literature that frames our work. Reflection plays a key role in the experiential learning cycle by providing a ‘bridge’ between experience and theoretical conceptualization.

Learning, especially in work contexts, requires an introduction to theory, together with the opportunity to apply theory to real situations in the field. Professional situations are often complex and multifaceted, meaning that «they possess multiple solutions and contain uncertainty» (Harris *et al.* 2010: 4). Reflection, then, represents a fundamental process for the practitioner who must draw on theoretical knowledge, previous experience, and knowledge of the current situation to determine the most appropriate solution. In fact, John Dewey defined reflection as a process aimed to «transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious» (Dewey 1933: 101–102). He saw reflection as a process of inquiry that leads to a more thoughtful consideration of facts. Many years later, Schön recognized reflection as an essential method of acquiring professional knowledge. He introduced the concepts of *reflection-in-action*, spontaneous and immediate, and *reflection-on-action*, consisting in an analysis of the circumstances of the event, from a distance, and planning of future actions, based on careful consideration of all information (Schön 1983). Later on, other scholars added the proactive aspect of *reflection-for-action* (Killion, Todnem 1991; van Manen 1991, 2008), that implies planning future actions based on one’s experience and previous learning.

In sum, the experiential learning theory is an educational perspective that aims at integrating theoretical and practical elements of learning using reflection as a ‘bridge’, adopting a holistic approach and emphasizing the meaning attributed to experience. This theory of learning is well known in various informal settings, such as curricular traineeships in service organizations. Experiential learning techniques include a rich variety of interactive practices whereby the participants have opportunities to contribute actively to their own learning, rather than being passive recipients in a hetero-directed process.

### 3. Methodology

In our work we have adopted a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Phenomenology is a philosophical orientation

that emphasises people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. It is based on a strong belief in the «importance of subjective consciousness» and on «an understanding of consciousness as meaning-bestowing» (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2011). From a methodological viewpoint, in the project presented in this paper, we have used the grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to build theory, «an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon» (Creswell 1998) from data «systematically gathered and analysed» (Strauss, Corbin 1994: 273). A grounded theory is a theory that emerges from data rather than being predefined and tested: theory generation originates from systematic data collection and analysis; patterns and theories are implicit in data, waiting to be discovered (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2011). A grounded study begins with the raising of generative questions, which help to guide the research but are not intended to be either static or curbing. As the researcher begins to gather data, theoretical categories are identified, and, through open coding and constant comparison, tentative connections are developed between the categories and the data. As stated by its founders, grounded theory is a complex iterative process where data collection and analysis go hand in hand, continually informing one another (Glaser, Strauss 1967). The researcher can use several different methods to collect data, both quantitative and qualitative: from in-depth interviews, to participant observation, analysis of documents, collection of artefacts and texts, and questionnaires. A very important aspect of the grounded theory approach, as of most qualitative research, is the researcher's direct involvement in the social environment being studied, which often requires extensive fieldwork.

Our project began when we acknowledged a problematic situation: while reading students' traineeship reports, we wondered why the writings were so limited in terms of reflection despite the variety and 'richness' of the field experiences. At first, we thought of analysing a number of final reports, to verify whether our impression corresponded to reality. While we gathered and read more than 30 final reports written by trainees in many different fields, we built, step by step, and using an iterative process, our framework for content analysis, identifying core concepts and, consequently, substantive codes to summarize empirical evidence.

The second phase of the projects, partially overlapping with the first, consisted of the administration of semi-structured interviews to students in the final phase of their traineeship, as a strategy to foster reflective thinking. In line with the grounded theory approach, which requires a context to be studied from different perspectives and using different methods, these interviews can also be seen as a tool to collect data on reflective processes. As far as our own partici-

pation is concerned, while it was not possible to observe traineeships directly in the organizations where they took place, our involvement as researchers came from long-standing experience as academic tutors, a deep knowledge of the programme's educational goals and the practice of supervising students' experiences closely and thoroughly. Interviews and informal meetings with students were a way for us researchers to further 'immerse' ourselves in the reality of traineeships.

#### 4. Research project

To begin, we delved into the analysis of 32 final traineeship reports. Since the goal of our traineeship programme was to enhance students' learning through field experience, we wanted trainees to reflect mainly on their learning outcomes. Final reports should, in our opinion, contain reflections about learning at various levels. Which is why we used the following 5 criteria during the analysis process:

- *Knowing*: content referring to theoretical knowledge and 'theoretical know-how' learned simply by observing others. For example, learning about methods to teach children foreign languages builds theoretical knowledge; observing how English language teachers apply one specific method during daily activities in a nursery school leads to developing 'theoretical know-how';
- *Knowing how to do*: content referring to growth in practical abilities developed through active participation. An example of this category is learning how to approach a student with Down syndrome simply by doing it;
- *Knowing how to be*: content referring to growth in terms of behaviour and attitudes relating to a professional role. Learning how to be gentle and authoritative at the same time with children is an example of this category;
- *Theory and practice*: content referring to the student's ability to create linkages between formal and informal education, between academic and work-based learning. An example could be observing the Montessori method applied to children and being able to discuss a child's daily activities of referring to an authoritative theoretical framework;
- *Vocational guidance*: content referring to the educational value of the traineeship experience, in terms of understanding of personal aptitudes and aspirations and their concrete applicability in a work field or specific profession. As an example, a student wrote that the traineeship in a nursery school taught her how infant education was not her primary goal for a professional future and explained why, based on her field experience. In addition to this, she imagined a



different placement for her future and motivated her choice based on expected work characteristics that were ‘in contrast’ with her experience at the nursery school.

Going back to our objective assessing the level of reflective writing in the students’ final reports, an analysis of the first 32 pieces confirmed that they were basically lacking in terms of ‘reflection on action’: most of them could have been defined, using Moon’s categorization, as merely *descriptive*, while a minority of them could have been named *descriptive writings with some reflections* (Moon 2006). Therefore, we decided to test a strategy to help students re-elaborate their experience. In the second phase of our project, we created a protocol for semi-structured interviews and subsequently administered 13 interviews to students who had just finished their traineeship and were about to write their final report. The interviews were designed to ensure that the trainees could take a critical look at themselves and their actions and explain the results of this reflection. The interview protocol was based mainly on the four-stage model of experiential learning, where the four stages are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation (Kolb 1984). Some questions were inspired by the Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) model (McClelland 1973). This technique, which originates from the critical-incident method (Flanagan 1954) enriched with the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) of aspects concerning the person, his/her motivation, learning style, and ways of thinking (Murray 1943), is used mainly in human resource management for the selection of personnel, because it helps in evaluating behaviour activated by critical situations, discovering what people do concretely and how they face work-related challenges. Although we are not working in human resources, we believe that starting from behavioural events can be useful to help students reflect on concrete experience and on the learning derived from it. In the end, these were the inputs used for the interview:

- Can you briefly describe your traineeship experience?
- Do you remember a situation during your traineeship when you encountered a problem? Can you describe it and explain what you did and how you felt, what others did, and how in the end the problem was approached and eventually solved?
- Can you recall a moment during your traineeship experience when you felt particularly useful? Can you describe the circumstances, what you did, how you felt and the reasons why you felt that way?
- Thinking about three ‘areas of competence’, that is, ‘knowing’, ‘knowing how to do’ and ‘knowing how to be’, can you bring examples from your field experience that show your personal growth and skill development?

- At the end of your traineeship experience, what do you think about your professional future after university? Did the traineeship help you reflect on this and if so, how?

Trainees responded positively to the interviews, sharing a great deal about their experiences and, in general, demonstrating that they possessed some, albeit limited, reflective abilities. Afterwards, they were invited to write their final report within 15 days, or, for those who had already written it, to review it, so as to include the reflections that emerged during the interview.

The third and last phase of our work was a comparison between the reports produced without any ‘support strategy’ and those produced after an interview, to assess whether there had been an improvement in terms of the ability to think reflectively about experience. In some cases (3 out of 13), we realized that the traineeship reports written before the interview had not been modified in any way: an arbitrary choice of the students, going against our suggestion to review them in light of the reflections that emerged during the interviews. In the majority of the cases (8 out of 13), the report had been written after the interview. However, contrary to expectations, we had to recognize that *descriptive accounts* (Moon 2006) had remained essentially the same: these reports focused mainly on a description of the host organization and the activities performed, without much reflection on outcomes in terms of learning. We frequently found extremely generic statements about personal growth and skills development, without explanations of *how* learning had been achieved and *what* specific knowledge or skills had been developed:

This traineeship experience helped me grow both professionally and as a person.

During my traineeship I found many connections between the theories learned in class and the development of the child observed during everyday life at the kindergarten.

Only in one case did we note an improvement from *descriptive writing* to *descriptive writing with some reflections*, where the student, whose traineeship took place in a foster home for disadvantaged minors, went beyond merely reporting facts and included some personal evaluations of her learning achievements:

Every time the staff intervened, they would explain to me why they had acted in a certain way and remind me that every ward has his/her own past and personality that need to be respected. Therefore, it is necessary to understand when it's the best time to intervene to tackle a problem.

It's been a positive experience from all viewpoints, for the close relationships that I've developed, and also for the knowledge, both technical and personal, that I've acquired [...]. What I learned from university exams was extremely useful, but not enough. You need to have experience, a lot of experience, to really understand how everything works in these environments, how to face difficult moments and how to intervene and support the wards in a constructive way.

The relationship with children and adolescents made me understand that we should never take anything for granted. In every attitude, every word, every action there is a world to discover. We need to understand that world in order to make our contribution which, though small, is nonetheless very important.

I didn't expect to feel so comfortable in the foster home. Before starting my traineeship, I thought it would be much 'heavier' from an emotional viewpoint, but in the end, for me, it wasn't. Obviously, there were difficulties, but, as in any other experience, it is important to know that you can make mistakes. From mistakes we learn, we learn that we should never give up, we should always be honest with ourselves and understand if what we're doing makes us happy and proud.

Finally, only one report could really be described as *reflective writing* and, to some extent, also as *critical reflection*. The student did her traineeship in a nursery and maternal school and in her report reflected a great deal on the connections established between theoretical learning and work-based learning. In addition, she elaborated on the 'conflict' between commercial and educational goals and about her own efforts to find a personal balance, accepting reality and, at the same time, refusing to compromise:

Before my traineeship, I was advised to read *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer* by Tracy Hogg. This book made me immerse myself in the complexity and beauty of care-giving, providing concrete instruments for daily practice with the infants. There's a passage in Hogg's book that captured my attention, where, in my opinion, the author makes the reader reflect about a pillar of education: that the 'newly arrived' should be considered as people, in their wholeness and particularity. [...] Based on this scientifically valid assumption, I prepared myself for a traineeship in a school for 0-6-year-old children.

The organization of spaces and materials in the nursery school where I worked was based mainly on commercial criteria, even if some more sophisticated games were available and captured my attention. [...] My experience was a reality check. The institutions that operate in the field of infant education are many and diverse. They adopt educational models that are not always based on pedagogical studies. Seeing all this with my own eyes conflicted, on the one hand, with the theoretical knowl-

edge developed during my university studies; on the other, it made me struggle, and forced me to find adequate solutions to live and act in that specific organizational context.

My background in philosophy and education contributed to shaping my profile as a 'reflection-prone' individual. It contributed to my inclination towards individual and group reflection, to my attention in choosing acts and words dedicated to others, based on the situation and the context. [...] I put all of myself into being there in the most serene and relational way possible, overcoming initial difficulties, willing to get the best out of a place where they offered entertainment rather than genuine educational activities.

### 5. Final remarks

There can be no knowledge without  
emotion. We may be aware of a truth,  
yet until we have felt its force, it is not  
rs. To the cognition of the brain must  
be added the experience of the soul.  
(Arnold Bennett)

An informed use of knowledge is possible only when we put into play personal interests, emotions, and affection. The experiential learning theory emphasizes non-cognitive aspects of learning. According to Tomassini (2007), in the social sciences, many feel a need to fill the void created by the predominance of cognitivism in learning theories. Many are starting to oppose the idea that reflection is a cognitive activity and that the couple cognition-rationality should be considered 'superior' to emotions. From this viewpoint, a sort of 'emotionalization' of reflection is the necessary premise of every strategy aimed to strengthen reflection itself. Writing, if we wish it to become a reflective exercise, must focus on real experiences, experienced with emotion, sometimes even with 'suffering'. The storyteller must look at his/her experience as something from which it is possible to learn, something that has a moral. He/she must be able to reflect on 'what happens' outside of him/herself (reflection) as well as on his/her own actions, as if he/she were looking in a mirror (reflexivity) (Tomassini 2007). Those who tell of their experience must be able to seek and find a meaning within it. A continuous search for meaning is the root of reflection (Mortari 2003).

We tried to stimulate the search for meaning through the interviews. At first, the results of our research work were 'disappointing': we expected to receive final reports much improved and richer in reflections. However, if we refer to the experiential learning theory,

these results become clearer and can be viewed as a starting point for future action. As already discussed, experiential learning must be seen as a continuous process, rather than as an outcome. Reflective thinking is a ‘fuel’ for experiential learning, and if we do not provide it constantly, the learning process is going to be interrupted. We knew it was unlikely that students would learn how to ‘reflect on action’ with only one, albeit in-depth, interview (Schön 1983). The interviews were undoubtedly very useful for them to look at their experience from a distance, but they cannot be the only support offered. At the end of this project, what we do know is that, despite the scarcity of resources, we must do our best to strengthen and enrich the support given to trainees, especially in terms of reflective practice. We also know that we should encourage students to see the traineeship report not merely as a formal requirement for credit, but also as an occasion to re-elaborate their experience. We are currently considering setting up student-managed reflection groups, where older students help younger peers to activate a reflection process on their field experience. Ultimately, learning is never a merely individual phenomenon concerning only one person, but involves a community of practice (Lave, Wenger 1991)<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 – Experiential learning cycle: goals, instruments, reflective practice, and reflexivity.



<sup>3</sup> The concept of ‘community of practice’ was first elaborated at the beginning of the ’90s in the realm of studies on apprenticeship conducted by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave (Lave, Wenger 2006). These studies overturned the common belief that apprenticeship is based on a relationship between master and novice, affirming instead that learning a skill is based on a social process of participation in a practice. Such practice entails a system of relationships between the novice and other members of the group, between the novice and the practice itself, and between the novice and the culture of the group.

The group work could benefit from using our interview questions, based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle, as prompts for sharing experiences and discussion. In fact, the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984; Gibbs 2013) begins with *concrete experience* (question: «Can you briefly describe your traineeship experience?»), continues with *reflective observation* (questions: «Do you remember a situation during your traineeship when you encountered a problem? [...]; Can you recall a moment during your traineeship experience when you felt particularly useful?») and subsequently *abstract conceptualization* (questions: «Thinking about three “areas of competence”, that is, “knowing”, “knowing how to do” and “knowing how to be”, can you bring examples from your field experience showing your personal growth and skill development?; At the end of your traineeship experience, what do you think about your professional future after university? [...]). The fourth stage of Kolb's cycle, *active experimentation*, happens when the trainee applies what he/she has learnt – and reflected on – to his/her future actions. This is precisely what Killion and Todnem (1991) called *reflection-for-action*, the desired outcome of the first two types of reflection. We propose, therefore, to add a question for the trainees: «How can I improve next time? What can I do differently?». In this way, the experiential learning cycle never ends: the last stage flows into the first one, translating into a practice that is more reflective, more aware, and more competent.

Among the materials we provide on the Moodle page are guidelines on how to write logbooks. In talking to students, we realized that logbooks are considered useless and a ‘waste of time’, and are rarely used. Instead, daily or weekly logbooks could become the main source of reflective learning for trainees. Noticing facts, beliefs, emotions, and critical incidents when they happen is fundamental to remembering and, later on, using as material for reflective thinking. Logbooks could also offer input to be discussed during classes, trying to establish connections between theory and field experience. Reflection, Dewey wrote, is a process of inquiry (Dewey 1933), and inquiry means asking questions. It is very important to elicit students' questions in all phases of their academic and work-based experience: not only questions on what we tell them in class, or on the reading materials for our courses, but also on what they see and experience at their placements. Logbooks could also be the place in which to gather all their questions, waiting for the occasion to share and search for answers. In sum, keeping logbooks regularly pushes the learner to alternate between being an actor or an observer, to go from active involvement to analytical detachment, exercising critical thinking by entering a cyclical experiential learning process. Moreover, while writing is widely recognized as a tool to enhance reflective practice

by re-processing and interpreting experience, we should not make the mistake of taking writing abilities for granted. In some of our interviews, we noticed reflective thinking skills that unexpectedly 'disappeared' in the written reports. Reflective writing should also be taught and practised. One way to do this might be to show students the difference between descriptive accounts and reflective writings, or perhaps to share some of the best student work from previous years.

For the moment, we can say that our first intervention initiated a process of simultaneous training and inquiry. We plan to continue our laboratory for reflective practice, providing students more and diversified occasions to exercise reflection on action. Every strategy, to become effective and real, needs to deal with a scarcity of resources, but as Dewey would say, «a genuine purpose always starts with an impulse» (1938).

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