**The Social Experience of Reflection**

Nicholas Bowskill, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow

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Abstract: *This work is part of an inter-disciplinary project based in the Faculty of Education at the University of Glasgow. The project is concerned with technology and discussion. We are interested in reflection embedded in the social context facilitated by sharing different perspectives. This is in contrast with more individually-oriented views of reflection typified by the work of Dewey and his followers. Using electronic voting systems (EVS) technology and a protocol to generate reflective conversations we sought to construct a social experience of reflection. We were inspired by the work of George H. Mead and the reciprocal relationship between self and community development. Through structured dialogue and interaction, the aim was to facilitate a sense of the community in which people learn. This supports an understanding of the self relative to the community for mutual benefit. To achieve this, our intervention generated a reflective conversation based on the concerns of individuals in a course. Participants discussed their concerns within the shared experience of the first year of a course. They prioritised those concerns and ranked them within the course community. This provided a basis for identifying possible solutions from within the experience of the year-group. Individuals were able to see the range of concerns within the year-group and locate themselves within that range. This is contribution towards knowledge-building for and within the community. The process creates a social experience of reflection and supports a discourse between the different communities in which the students participate.*

**INTRODUCTION**

This study forms part of an inter-disciplinary project based at the University of Glasgow. It is concerned with discussion and the use of electronic voting systems (EVS) technology. Cain and Robinson (2008) have provided a useful primer for those new to this technology. Some of the many effects of using this technology for learners include:

* *positive attitudes regarding the use of an ARS in classes*
* *Reinforcement of content*
* *provision of feedback,*
* *anonymity in participation,*
* *increased interest in the course*
* *and ability to compare one's level of knowledge to the rest of the class*

For those interested in knowing more about the subject-based applications and research into the use of this technology I would refer the reader to Keller (2008) for a comprehensive overview of the current literature. There is also a useful web site assembled by Steve Draper of University of Glasgow that includes a considerable collection of links and commentary on EVS. I have used ‘EVS’ as the term adopted by the project at University of Glasgow but Keller highlights the difficulties for researches in this area listing 26 different terms used for this technology.

This article explores the development of a social experience of reflection based on George H. Mead’s (1934) ideas of reflective action. Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990) provide a detailed view of Mead’s ideas. Here I will summarise the key points before looking at one approach to implementing these ideas in practice. This approach uses electronic voting systems (EVS) technology and a structured protocol.

In Mead’s (1934) social theory, the self is constructed through knowledge of the community and interaction with it. Both the sense of self and the sense of the community are continually developing over time. The view of the community and its values, beliefs and knowledge is ‘organized’ by the individual into a ‘generalized other.’ Through interaction, the self is modified according to this generalized other. Problems, current or past, are seen as the initiator of that interaction. The self and the generalized other are in a reciprocal relationship with each informing the development of the other. The means by which this happens is through dialogue.

When an individual encounters a problem or recalls a problem from the past then, according to Mead’s theory, that person recalls the view of the profession or community. They ask themselves what the perspective of the generalized other might be for this given situation. In this way the collective view is brought into consideration by the individual. This is the social experience of reflection and part of the socialization of the individual into that community.

The key task is to have and develop a sense of the community and awareness of the self in relation to it, the means for achieving this is through communication. Through dialogue with the community, meaning for situations and experiences is negotiated and socially constructed. The goal is to develop either a consensus or to remove obstructions to action (Cinnamond and Zimpher, 1990:63).

For Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990) the issue is how to socialize people into the difference communities they inhabit. Such communities might be student teacher communities, school communities in which they practice or academic communities. Finding a way of facilitating social reflection through conversations across the networks within these communities and between one community and another is seen as a key task.

This view of reflection is held up by Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990) as being in stark contrast to individually-oriented views of reflection. These authors cite Dewey as the forefather of this orientation. Dewey developed 5 stages of reflection that have been revised or recycled in various ways. Boud et al (1985) for example reduced this to a 3 stage model. Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle is not too remote from this idea and Schon (1983) has organized the process into phases (reflection in action and on action). All of these different models centre around an individual reflecting alone on a particular experience. The concern Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990) have –and implicitly Mead would have – about individually-oriented reflection is that it is conducted away from the community into which they are seeking to be socialized. In these individually oriented approaches to reflection, communities develop in a fragmented or disconnected way. Individuals struggle to develop a professional self because they are not in conversation with their communities. Therefore the task of getting a sense of the generalized other within which to develop the self is made more difficult. What could be done about this in practice?

Bruffee (1993) indirectly elaborates on the ideas of George H. Mead (1933) by providing some discussion of social constructionist views of acculturation. For Bruffee (1993), learning is about culture change - a journey from one culture to other cultures. Participation in groups is seen as supportive of that journey as either a stepping stone or an end-point. Support groups are seen as transitional and conversations are the key facility they can provide for helping new participants learn and use the language of that culture.

Groups support the movement from one culture to another. Conversation is the means of language acquisition and the language used within a given culture creates the relationships amongst its population. A newcomer needs to learn the language to function and gain a sense of belonging to the network of relationships within the community. Through interaction and language acquisition an individual becomes part of the dynamic set of relationships changed through activity and conversation.

Writing is understood as a product of the community and its members. Bruffee(1993) sees text as a way of joining a conversation with the community and transition groups are seen as adopting authors for their journey into the target culture. In addition, Bruffee describes how groups address problems through writing when one person in the group authors a text. Others in the group might comment, annotate or edit it and through a process of modification and dialogue the text becomes group property.

When individuals move from one culture to another through conversation the first aim is to establish some common understanding of the matter under consideration. To understand what they are discussing they are said by Bruffee to translate the different views in order to develop a shared language and through that to find an answer they can both agree upon. The issue of translation through conversation is one factor and the search for a consensus is another that are seen as important in acculturation.

When individuals consider a problem or task they may recall conversations with the community. Those recalled conversations are translated in the mind of the individual considering that given problem and the terms used in those conversations are given new meaning in the process. Conversations can therefore be in a face to face discussion, with authors from the community or recalled when an individual is alone. The impact of these conversations can be language acquisition, a willingness to collaborate and to have a other conversations, the creation of a new view and a possible solution/knowledge of the problem being considered.

Conversation and language development are facilitated by shared consideration of problems or situations. A key feature of this is the search for a consensus through the translation processes. Bruffee (1993) discusses the work of Abercrombie who changed away from asking students on medical rounds individually to respond with a diagnosis. This was changed to a situation where the group of students were required to work together to reach a shared view of the diagnosis. This necessitated dialogue and the sharing of ‘biases or presuppositions.’ The students were in transition towards becoming members of the medical community. The search for consensus extends the idea of merely facilitating interaction and dialogue around an issue.

Brufee (1993) also raises the issue of cultural difference that may be a barrier to collaboration and discussion. He cites Treisman who found that some groups were not culturally inclined towards discussion and collaboration around course topics. By training and then requiring people to collaborate scores were improved in line with other groups who were more inclined to conversations and group work. Another key factor appears to be the level of trust that exists amongst a given group to be open to disclosure. Bruffee (1993) notes that this takes time and that this is something needed for participants to get to know each other and develop that trust. He also notes this time as increasingly scarce when students are so busy with work-life balance and other issues.

From our review of Mead (1934) and Bruffee(1993) we can see a dynamic relationship between individuals and community facilitated and defined through language and conversation. The role of groups is highlighted along with writing, consensus, time, trust, and language acquisition. We will return to these variables together with the role of technology in the discussion at the end of this paper.

**Our Research Context**

For our research the task was to explore ways of facilitating a social experience of reflection. Is there a way of supporting dialogue within and across communities? Can we support a dialogue at a community level through which individuals might develop their selves and the community? Can we help people obtain a sense of the generalized other? For our study the generalized other would be the course cohort for a particular year in a course. The other generalized other would be the social construct of the first year experience (FYE). The FYE would effectively become the vehicle for developing a social history of the students on a particular course.

To explore this, we worked with tutors on a Health Science course at a UK university in the North of England. We ran 2 slightly different sessions each using the same structured protocol. With Year 2 students we also used an electronic voting system (EVS) technology. With Year 1 students we used PowerPoint slides to capture issues raised and record votes manually. When each session was completed a joint session was arranged. The joint-session involved a group of 6 Year 2 volunteers and Year 1 students. The focus for each of the sessions was FYE although in the case of the Year 2 session the discussion went beyond to consider current and future concerns.

The aim of the intervention was to ground the conversations in the concerns of the participants thereby raising the problems at the heart of Mead’s interaction between the self and the community. Through the conversations that ensued we hoped to facilitate a socialization process and a capacity for obtaining a view of the cohort-community, its experience and some of its knowledge. We did not expect that our small scale intervention would result in great change or have a significant impact. Our goal was to explore the potential of the approach as a vehicle for providing a social experience of reflection.

The protocol used is shown below. It was used with 42 students on Year 1 of the course and with 27 students in Year 2 of the same course. The Year 2 session was implemented prior to the Year 1 session largely for reasons of convenience and availability. At the end of the Year 2 session we asked for 6 volunteers to run a similar session with Year 1 students. The idea was that the volunteers would act as mentors around the FYE for the newly arrived Year 1 students.

**The Protocol as Applied**



The above diagram provides an overview of the process using the protocol and EVS. The recipe for the session was as follows:

1. Introduction to session & plan
2. Distribute & complete questionnaire
3. Small group discussion on initial concerns at start of year 1
4. Create an EVS question from list
5. Vote on main concern
6. Small group discussion on solutions to be recorded on a blank sheet of paper and handed in after feedback to class
7. Re-present first question and ask which of these concerns remain in year 2
8. Ask for any additional concerns in year 2 plus any possible solutions or sources of support that may seem appropriate to be discussed in small groups and recorded on a sheet of paper to be handed in after feedback
9. Present results of vote 1 & 2 on 1 slide to show development
10. Request volunteers to run a similar session to year 1students
11. Thanks & close

This protocol was designed with a quite typical individually oriented structure of past, present and future concerns. The key difference is that we re-located this individually-oriented structure to sit within a collaborative context. Through the discussions the aim was to support the development of a social approach to reflection. The intention was that the social experience would generate an overview of the concerns held within the community. In addition, the community would share solutions and ideas for addressing those concerns. This might also generate a sense of community development through the construction of a view of their shared journey (via the slide showing votes 1 and 2 above). This might be furthered through the creation of a shareable artifact (the record of those concerns and the distribution of them within the group at a given moment in time. In addition, we hoped that the protocol might help individuals locate themselves, their concerns and their development with and within the cohort-community.

**Data Collection**

We collected the following data in the sequence below:

Tutor Interviews

* transcribed audio recording

Year 2 Session with EVS

* individual questionnaires
* concerns and voting returns
* small group self-recording sheets with solutions

Focus Group with Volunteers

* transcribed audio recording

Year 1 Session without EVS

* individual questionnaires
* concerns and voting returns
* small group self-recording sheets with solutions

Joint Session with Years 1 and 2

* concerns and voting returns
* evaluation of joint session by Year 1 students (voting)
* evaluation of joint session by Year 2 volunteers (questionnaire returns)

**The Findings**

The table below shows the list of concerns regarding the FYE of Year 2 students. As well as the particular concerns the table also shows the distribution of those concerns within the Year 2 student body. There was 100% participation in the votes due to the use of EVS to collect and display the votes. We can see for example that the Year 2 cohort-community was primarily concerned with making friends in Year 1 and also balancing life and study.

Table 1: Year 2 Students: Topics and votes for Year 1 Experience

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year 1 Concerns** | **No. of People with that**  **Concern** |
| Domestic Skills | 0 |
| Being Undressed | 0 |
| Balancing Study and Life | 8 |
| Managing Money | 3 |
| Living with Illness | 0 |
| Unclear  Workload | 2 |
| Friends | 14 |

Table 2 below shows the concerns of Year 1 students at the time of arrival at the university. These votes are not complete. The table shows the range of concerns for this Year 1 cohort-community but not the full distribution of those concerns across the whole group. This session was done without the technology and voting was conducted through a show of hands. We also see different concerns in this group. Issues such as making friends (explicitly contained in “coping with new situations”) polled no votes and the same was true of work-life balance. As we might expect, this community is different and at a different stage of development from the Year 2 cohort-community.

Table 2: Year 1 Students: Topics and votes for Year 1 Experience

|  |
| --- |
| * Keeping up to date with work 6 |
| * Coping with work-life balance 0 |
| * Finance 0 |
| * Failing 0 |
| * Coping with new situations 0 |
| * Meeting the standard required 8 |
| * Assignments making sure they’re right 9 |

The 4 tables below display the concerns that were common to both the Year 1 and Year 2 students around the issue of FYE. They represent the concerns of the wider course-community constructed by the hybrid of the 2 cohorts together. The votes shown are from the Year 1 students mentored in the joint session by Year 2 volunteers. In this session, a vote was taken on a topic and a discussion followed. After the discussion time was over the next topic was introduced. Once all 4 topics were covered a 2nd vote was taken. This time the topics were voted on one after the other with no discussion between. We can see that for each topic there was at least some movement from vote 1 to vote 2. It seems reasonable to suggest this was as a result of the conversation with the Year 2 volunteers In Mead’s framework this is an interaction between the 2 cohort-communities.

Table 3: Question 1 Money Problems

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Vote 1 | Vote 2 |
| Job Advice | 0% | 0% |
| Bank Management | 0% | 0% |
| Shop Sensibly | 13% | 11% |
| Academic Tutor | 25% | 22% |
| Student Services | 62% | 67% |

Table 4: Question 2: Newness/Friends

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Vote 1 | Vote 2 |
| All in the same boat | 78% | 33% |
| Join Societies | 22% | 45% |
| Meet People | 0% | 22% |
| Explore Town | 0% | 0% |

Table 5: Question 3 Balancing Study and Life

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Vote 1 | Vote 2 |
| Prioritise | 67% | 56% |
| Know Timetable | 11% | 22% |
| Get a Diary | 22% | 22% |

Table 6: Question 4 Help with Workload Issues

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Vote 1 | Vote 2 |
| Plan Ahead | 67% | 45% |
| Writing Support | 22% | 22% |
| Prioritise | 11% | 33% |
| Use Tutors | 0% | 0% |

**Evaluation of the Joint Session.**

Through the use of EVS we were able to evaluate the social experience of reflection. The tables below show the evaluation questions and the responses gathered from Year 1 participants.

Question 1 sought to explore the impact of the session by gauging the appetite for other similar sessions in the future. 78% of participants expressed an interest in further sessions

**Table 7: Evaluation 1:** What would you like to see next?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| More but no technology | 0% |
| Enough thanks | 22% |
| More sessions | 56% |
| Regular sessions | 22% |

Question 2 sought to assess the relevance of the session to participants needs. 67% said they tool ideas away to try. This may be one of the reasons why participants expressed interest in further sessions in Question 1.

Table 8: **Evaluation 2:** Have we addressed your concerns?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I feel I was not alone | 0% |
| Useful but need more | 22% |
| No change | 11% |
| Yes Ideas I might try | 67% |

Question 3 aimed at gaining some understanding of the impact that using the EVS technology had made on the interaction. A percentage noted the value in being able to see the thinking of others and a similar number thought the technology made it fun. Nobody reported the technology as a barrier to discussion.

Table 9: **Evaluation 3**: The use of the technology

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Helped discussion | 0% |
| No Difference | 33% |
| Made it fun | 34% |
| Good to see others thinking | 33% |
| Got in way | 0% |

The number of year 1 participants attending was low and represented a very small percentage of the overall Year 1 cohort (9 out of 42). Despite this, we have a sense that the session provided ideas to try, a wish for further similar sessions and an enjoyable experience. It also facilitated a view of others in the same cohort and a wider perspective on those concerns shared with Year 2 students.

The volunteers from Year 2 were also canvassed for their opinions through the use of a follow-up questionnaire which was emailed to each of them. There is a suggestion that the experience supported their self-esteem and that it was also enjoyable for them. *“A brilliant feel good experience, where it seemed both groups got much from each other.”* We do not know how much of this is attributable to this particular session or the additional session before it. Likewise we can not be clear about the contribution of the structure of this session, the technology used, the numbers involved or other factors.

It was interesting to note the volunteers valued the experience of using the technology more than the Year 1 students. *“I feel the experience worked well for both first and second year students, though the technology aspect seemed to be more appreciated by the second year group.”* Again we do not know if this was due the Year 2 students having had previous experience with the technology or whether there were other explanations for this view.

We also have some evidence that the collaboration prompted reaction in the volunteers. *“It was interesting to see how we could help the 1st years, and that they wanted it, but also as a second year to remind me of what I can do to help guide my own learning.”* Here is the reciprocity between individual and community within the social experience of reflection.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to explore the ways in which the use of EVS might support discussion. Specifically, we wanted to look at the socialization of individuals through shared reflection. This was to be done through the facilitation of conversations around problems and possible solutions that existed within the community. We also sought to understand the potential of our approach to help people obtain a sense of their community as a ‘generalizable other.’ Could we also help the community reflect together and through the experience have a sense of itself as a community? Could individuals develop themselves and would they be mindful of their communities? We have made some progress but more work remains.

In terms of the design we have:

* Created reflective conversations within 2 year groups and between years.
* Created reflective conversations upon a 12 month period and beyond
* Provided a safe and well structured discussion for peer-dialogue.
* Managed the dialogue across small group and plenary interaction
* Maximised participation in voting upon a range of issues
* Removed dominating or disruptive tendencies in small group discussions

In terms of the discussion:

* We have shown an impact from interaction between novices and those with experience. The Year 1 students changed their position on each issue following discussion with Year 2 students in the joint session.
* We have been able to show shifts in concerns and to be able to rank those concerns at different milestones in the course experience. The Year 2 session identified the journey across the start of the course, the start of year 2 and the year ahead.
* We have been able to compare the concerns before and after the same experience. The 4 common concerns represent the intersection of those at the start of Year 1 reflecting ahead and those starting Year 2 reflecting back.

We do not know:

* The nature of the conversations that occur in small groups
* The significance of students generating concerns for discussion versus a dialogue around concerns from the wider community
* We don’t know the effect of viewing the range of concerns and the distribution of them upon the community
* We don’t know the effect of viewing the range of concerns and the distribution of them upon the individuals
* We don’t know the importance of face to face discussion with the wider community compared with documents from the wider community
* We don’t know whether it is equally effective to focus on a shorter period of time than a year
* We don’t know whether it is equally useful for reflecting upon an event such as a placement or a field trip

In conclusion, we have what appears to be a robust framework for a well-structured dialogue. This provides a platform upon which to explore the conversations and the idea of social development. We need to research the impact of obtaining this view of a class on individuals and the class as a whole. Could social reflection contribute to a community-minded orientation rather than individually oriented mindsets?

When we widen interaction beyond the class community does it need to be in the form of face to face discussion? Could it be via documents from the wider community? How significant is it for the discussion to reflect upon the experiences of members of the group compared with the alternative of reflecting upon concerns external to the class from the wider community?

What is the exact nature of the dialogue that occurs in our framework? Does everyone participate and are they satisfied with the quality and value of the interaction? How well aware were the participants of the concerns held by their peers? How might they react to that awareness?

Finally, the tutors in our pilot were concerned over the lack of reflection from the students. We have created reflective conversations where there difficulties in doing so before. We have seen a variety of changes within this pilot caused by interaction between peers in the same year and by discussions across years. We are able to map the changes and as such we have a firm foundation for exploring the dialogue itself in subsequent research. We conceptualise this approach as one that creates and portrays a social experience of reflection.**REFERENCES**

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