

Reflective Self Study: A Tool for Understanding Leisure Behavior

Brenda J. Robertson

School of Recreation Management & Kinesiology
Acadia University
Wolfville, Nova Scotia
Canada B4P2R6

Phone: (902) 585-1522 • E-mail: Brenda.robertson@acadiau.ca

Abstract

The examination of self within a theoretical framework can provide insight into values, beliefs, and biases that underlie personal behavior and inform individual professional practise and decision making. Students in a Recreation Management program take a required course in second year entitled *Leisure Behavior*. In order to better understand the social psychological concepts and theories in practical terms, they are assigned the task of completing a reflective self-study journal which facilitates a guided experience of identifying and providing analysis of leisure behavior as they have experienced it throughout their lives. Reflecting upon the factors that have influenced their personal leisure development using social psychological theory not only enhances their understanding of the concepts, but also serves as a context for fostering a better appreciation of the leisure behavior of others.

KEYWORDS: Leisure behavior, social psychology, reflective self-study

Introduction

The theory of constructivism suggests that individuals construct knowledge by incorporating personal experience into an existing theoretical framework (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). For example, teachers can facilitate experiences in which learners, as individuals with unique needs and backgrounds, use their personal experiences to understand a lecture or a set of readings. The use of personal reflection as a teaching and learning tool in higher education has existed for many years. Silcock (1994) identified and discussed three components related to the process of reflective teaching: ego driven purpose, restructuring capability, and transforming perspective. The ego driven nature of reflection implies that individuals have agency – they are responsible for their own actions and that reflection must precede action. Becoming more conscious of thoughts and action enables individuals to engage in cognitive restructuring and compose internal dialogue that can reshape the meaning of lived experience. Transformation suggests that our developmental cognitive journey can lead only in one direction, meaning that once students gain new insights through a reflective lens, ignorance is no longer a possibility. For these reasons, Silcock views reflection as an important tool for framing past experience into new conceptual understandings, and believes that reflection can inform professional practise by internally transferring knowledge between contexts.

The use of the reflective self-study has been reported in education journals and proceedings for the past twenty years. However, such use has been confined largely to the teacher education literature despite calls for expansion of the application to other disciplines (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003). Identity-oriented self-study is a means of introspectively examining “who am I?” through a retrospective personal life history. The examination of self within a theoretical framework can provide insight into values, belief, and biases that underlie personal behaviour and inform individual professional practise and decision making.

Shannon (2007) discussed the use of autobiographical writing with leisure studies students as a means of fostering a better understanding of how their personal experience with gender reflects existing leisure concepts and theories. The self-study was an opportunity to view their experiences through different eyes as they discussed personal life events with family members and significant others such as teacher, youth leaders, coaches, and friends. Self-reflection through the lens of leisure and gender theory brought about a much deeper understanding of specific events that had occurred in their lives. Students became much more aware of how their personal values and attitudes impacted their world view and their actions, causing them to further reflect upon how that might impact their professional practise after graduation. Shannon calls for the use of narrative as a means of facilitating an understanding of complex concepts and theories by having students apply them to their personal life experiences.

Understanding leisure behavior, that is the factors that influence why individuals make the choices that they do, is critical to facilitating programs and services as well as unstructured recreation opportunities that will address and satisfy the recreation needs of individuals (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997).

One means of understanding social psychology is through a reflective self-study where students engage in autobiographical writing related to leisure in their lives and provide analysis making use of the social psychological concept learned through the course. Students gain an understanding of how factors such as needs, values, attitudes, knowledge, interest, experience, and constraints impact their own leisure behavior and are better able to facilitate it for others (Robertson, 2007).

The Learning Activity

In the second year Leisure Behavior course, students are introduced to a wide variety of concepts such as freedom and control, motivation, personality dispositions, need satisfaction, socialization, psychological benefits, values and constraints. As a means of better understanding the theoretical material and being able to apply it, students engage in an in-depth, reflective self-study assignment.

As a means of better framing the assignment in order to direct and guide the reflective process, a semi-structured journal consisting of 60 open ended questions was developed for students to complete, the description of which reads as follows:

Self Study Journal: Through the use of a guided journal, each student will be asked to reflect upon a series of questions relating to social psychological aspects of his or her leisure functioning. Journal questions have been designed to facilitate exploration of social psychological factors that have contributed to the development of the individual's leisure repertoire. Although the journal has been set up to correspond with the sequence of topics covered throughout the course, there is no prescribed order in which the student must complete the journal. Students may select the specific experiences that they include in their journal and as such they are not expected to divulge aspects of their life that they are not comfortable sharing. Journals will be graded on the depth of analysis relative to the content of the course.

The questions are divided into the following categories: pre-school years, elementary school years, junior/middle school years, high school years, university years, and general reflections. Questions such as "What factor(s) most influenced your leisure functioning during this period in your life" were included in each section. Other age/stage appropriate questions were asked in each section. For example, the types of questions relating to the middle school years included: "Identify leisure activities that you participated in during elementary school that you ceased participation in during your junior high/middle school years"; "What role did school play in your leisure education both relative to the curriculum and through extracurricular offerings"; and "How, if at all, do you believe that gender may have impacted upon your leisure behaviour?" In order to complete the first two sections, students need to engage in discussions with those who can provide the information such as parents, grandparents, and older siblings. Questions deal with topics such as favorite toys and games, stories, television viewing, family activities, early school experiences, and gender roles. These types of questions focus the attention of the student on underlying issues that are pedagogically valuable from a social psychological perspective such as socialization theory.

The junior/middle school year questions relate to issues such as use of computers, social relationships, stereotypes, curricular and extracurricular activi-

ties, and purple recreation. Motivation and satisfaction are two constructs that frequently emerge in this section. The high school section includes questions related to values, relationships, substance abuse, driving, use of technology, and jobs. Psychological benefit theories, personality constructs, and constraints are often applied to aspects of the high school years. The university questions relate to aspects such as the transition into a university lifestyle, domestic arrangements, constraints, family relationships, peer relationships, freedom, and personal wellness. The university experience is discussed from the perspective of concepts such as perceived freedom, lifespan and lifecycle models, and leisure affordance.

The general questions are designed to provide a holistic view of factors that have most influenced leisure functioning such as who have been the key leisure influencers, what leisure needs have been most dominant, and what experiences have brought the greatest satisfaction.

The assignment is announced the first day of class and is usually due about week nine of a 13 week term. In that way, students will have sufficient time to become familiar with the course content and to complete the writing. On average, students write between 250-500 word responses to each question. During the last month of class, through a variety of in-class discussions and assignments, students use insights gained from the journaling project to frame their understanding of factors impacting the leisure behavior of others. Emphasis is placed on enhancing the student's understanding of the leisure behavior as experienced by individuals of varying backgrounds relating to such factors as race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, socio economic status, and ability levels.

Learner Outcomes

The primary outcome of this activity is that students gain an appreciation for how social psychological concepts relate to actual life experience as well as a framework and language for analyzing aspects relating to leisure behavior. Other outcomes include:

1. An appreciation is gained for the factors that have positively and negatively influenced their leisure functioning such as involvement with active forms of recreation as well as through sedentary means involving extensive screen time such as television viewing, electronic messaging, and playing video games;
2. The nature of the role played by societal institutions such as schools, churches, and community organizations in facilitating or constraining leisure behavior becomes more evident;
3. The roles played by certain key individuals (e.g., parents) that have impacted their leisure functioning become more clearly understood. Students report gaining a new appreciation, from a more mature vantage point, of actions taken by others toward whom they may have harbored resentment prior to completing this assignment;

4. An understanding is developed of how certain life events (e.g., residential move, change in family structure, or experience with substance abuse) have impacted their leisure behavior.

Recommended Uses:

There are various applications for this type of a learning activity in recreation management/leisure studies curricula. It is appropriate for use in any course where students will have had experiences that they can relate to course theory and concepts. Two other examples of courses where the technique has been successfully applied in addition to *Leisure Behavior* are *Individual and Community Wellness* where students apply the knowledge of the five dimensions of wellness (physical, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) to assess their state of their personal wellness and the factors that have contributed to that over the years; and *Leisure & Gender* where students engage in reflective writing as a means of exploring and understanding how gender interacts with leisure behavior throughout life.

When making use of this technique there are a few aspects that the instructor must consider.

- When asking students to reflect on personal aspects of their lives, issues may arise with which the instructor is not particularly comfortable. As a reader, one must be prepared to accept that what is written as the student's lived experience that is being disclosed for educational purposes and not to be morally judged.
- Although the occasion has not arisen for me personally, an instructor may need to be prepared, at the request of the student, to assist him or her to process any personal issue that may arise as a result of the reflective process. In most cases, that would mean assisting the student to connect with professional counseling services on campus. In order for students to reflect honestly, they must feel comfortable with what they share and in knowing that the information will be kept in strict confidence by the instructor. It is important that students be informed that they are not required to provide any personal information that they are not comfortable sharing in their journals. Further, it is important that the student knows who will be reading and assessing their work. In my opinion, that should just be the instructor and not teaching assistants.
- This type of assignment works most effectively when the student has developed a relationship and a level of trust with the instructor. As such, the technique is better suited to small classes taught by an individual well known to the students. Further, it is important that the students feel that the instructor cares about them and their personal welfare, and that this is, in fact, true.
- Grading is an important component of such an assigned learning activity. Criteria must be clearly established so that students understand what is expected of them and upon what exactly they are being graded. The as-

assessment criteria must focus on the ability of the student to relate aspects of his or her life experience to concepts covered in the course and not on the specifics of the life experiences shared or not shared. Grading such an assignment is a daunting and time-consuming task. Serious consideration must be given by the instructor to his or her willingness to make such a commitment. To complete the assignment, student must respond all 60 of the questions, the value of each of which is weighed equally. Students are awarded points based upon the following criteria:

- To what extent does the student answer the question with sufficient description?
- To what extent does the student frame the response by linking events? For example, if someone took up a new activity such as playing guitar, what were the precipitating factors that led to that initiation of a new activity, and what, if any, activity was dropped from the repertoire as a result?
- To what extent does the student apply leisure behavior theory to aid in understanding and explaining the various aspects of his/her leisure life? I expect students to apply concepts such as motivation or constraints theory to help analyze their leisure lives. For example, if someone is playing a sport at an elite level, is that experienced as pure leisure or pure work according to Neulinger's paradigm, or is it a job or a leisure job and why?

Conclusions

Despite the magnitude of time and energy required to complete a reflective self study, many students really invest themselves in the assignment and will frequently insert supporting materials into their journals to help illustrate a point such as pictures of themselves and others, certificates and awards, old letters, and diary entries. The students embrace the opportunity to engage in a structured reflective look at their lives from a leisure behavior perspective. Further, students express appreciation for the analytical lens that leisure behavior theory provides to assist them with better understanding various actions of their past.

Many students find this to be an interesting activity because it is all about them, but as graduates they are better able to link knowledge gained from the assignment to specific insights and actions related to their professional practice. In correspondence with the author, one student reported two years after graduation, the following feedback... *"In Leisure Behaviour, our self-study assignment on our personal leisure behaviour from the day we were born to the present day and how it has affected us was a defining initiative for me. There has not been an experience in my life since that has affected me so profoundly. To put it simply, I discovered who I was and who I am. I was forced to face my fears by examining them within a theoretical framework and it has made me a better person. To this day, I still pull out my self-study to remind me of the meaning of a certain social psychological construct. How many students can say they still pull out their university paper to read because it makes them a better person?"*

As Silcock (1994) suggested, use of this particular reflection assignment does appear to be an effective educational tool both in terms of bridging and transforming properties. Many of the individuals completing this assignment appeared to have engaged in cognitive restructuring that has, in certain cases, caused them to reshape the meaning of their lived experience into new conceptual understandings. The intention is that such understandings will serve to better inform professional practise.

References

- Brooks, J. G., & Brooks, M. (1993). *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Louie, B.Y., Drevdahl, D.J., Purdy, J.M., & Stackman, R.W. (2003). Advancing the scholarship of teaching through collaborative self-study. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 74(2), 150-171.
- Mannell, R.C., & Kleiber, D.A. (1997). *A social psychology of leisure*. State College, PA.: Venture Publishing.
- Robertson, B.J. (2007). Leisure education. In R. McCarville & K. MacKay (Eds.), *Leisure for Canadians* (pp. 263-270). State College, PA.: Venture Publishing.
- Shannon, C.S. (2005). "Oh, I get it now": Autobiographical writing as fostering the understanding of gender and leisure interactions. *Scholar: Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education*, 20, 29-42.
- Silcock, P. (1994). The process of reflective teaching. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 42(3), 273-285.