BECOMING A REFLEXIVE PROFESSIONAL

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Abstract

The reflective paradigm in higher education emerged in the last two decades. Reflexivity has been emphasised as a necessary skill for future business professionals and the ability to critically reflect has been identified as a crucial part of employability. This calls for developing pedagogical approaches that will stimulate students' critical thinking skills and encourage self-review.

This paper presents an application of such pedagogical approaches applied in a set of course assignments and activities aimed specifically at developing reflexivity and self-reflection in undergraduate business students, within the context of a university of applied sciences. The paper also highlights that the pedagogical solutions applied not only resulted in the desired learning outcomes, but also produced additional benefits to the students.

A pedagogical approach was created and incorporated into an International Business Communication course spanning one semester. The course was taught to undergraduate international business students and aimed at developing both critical thinking skills and reflexivity. It was incorporated in three activities: (1) introducing the students to the concept of reflexivity (reflecting on reflection), (2) writing reflectively about one's own cultural identity (reflection in action), (3) story writing and storytelling (reflecting on action).

The methodological approach used was qualitative interpretation, and the method applied was narrative analysis of the data generated by reflective narratives created by the students.

The findings showed that reflexivity was identified as a new concept, both necessary and helpful in self-development. Reflecting on one's own cultural identity created different types of awareness, which contributed to developing deeper knowledge about said identity. Reflecting on story writing and storytelling illustrated the following learning benefits: discovering creative potential, as well as developing confidence in dealing with new, unexpected, and challenging situations. Moreover, the following additional learning benefits were identified: an enhanced openness towards the immediate environment, an improved understanding of otherness, and the applicability of the above skills for business professionals.

Keywords: Professional skills, Reflexivity, Business

INTRODUCTION

The present and future working environment is impacted by a flow of constant changes, such as environmental disasters, social injustice, corporate scandals, and questionable leadership ethics. Individuals experience the impact of these changes and have to adjust accordingly. Higher education should address and respond to the potential challenges that these changes involve by creating pedagogical approaches that prepare students to become resilient and adaptable. One way of doing this is to encourage students to become more reflexive.

Reflexivity is becoming an increasingly important resource in organisation studies, as well as a vital skill that future professionals must develop (Cunliffe, 2020). Wharton (2017) identified reflexivity as "a key element of employability in today's professions", and a professional imperative (McKay, 2008). Defined as questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, practices and policies, reflexivity offers a way of developing more critical and responsible approaches to people's intellectual strategies, and to practical activities within the corporate world.

Therefore, the development of reflexivity skills should be included in business school curricula. This calls for developing pedagogical approaches that stimulate students' critical thinking skills and encourage self-review, while also conveying practice realities.

This paper presents an application of such pedagogical methods applied in a set of course activities aimed specifically at developing reflexivity in undergraduate business students, within the context of a university of applied sciences. The results of the data, provided by the students, revealed that the pedagogical solutions applied not only resulted in the desired learning outcomes, but also produced additional benefits to the students.

In this paper, I begin by providing a literature review and briefly discuss the concepts of reflection and reflexivity and their application in learning. Second, I describe the pedagogical solutions (the process). Thirdly and finally, I present the findings.

Literature Review
Reflection
Reflection was first introduced by Dewey (1993) and defined as an "ability to 'turn things over,' to look at matters deliberately, to judge whether the amount and kind of evidence requisite for decision is at hand," (pp. 66-67). This combination of experiential and experimental thinking, as well as being concrete and abstract, lies at the heart of cognitive processes.

According to Dewey (1993), reflection begins with an experience and therefore facilitates learning from that experience, i.e., learning from doing. Dewey (1993) also claimed that reflective thinking moved people away from routine thinking/action (guided by tradition or external authority) and towards reflective action (involving careful and critical consideration of taken-for granted knowledge). Dewey's concepts provided a basis for the concept of 'reflective practice' developed by Schön (1987). Adopting a metaphor of swampy lowlands, Schön (1987) identified ways in which professionals could become aware of their implicit knowledge and learn from their experiences. The metaphor of swampy lowlands implies that students as learners and future practitioners are always immersed in their work environments where they gain experiences from which they learn. They learn by trial and error, which allows them freedom in trying to find diverse solutions to any given problem.

Schön also (1987) made a distinction between reflection-*on*-action and reflection-*in*-action. Reflection-on-action involves a retrospective evaluation of a decision, event, or behaviour, and considering what happened, why it happened, and how improvements can be made. Reflection-in-action is applied when practitioners rely on a tacit knowing-in-action, or as "thinking on your feet," which involves spontaneous actions, decisions, and talk. This way of reflecting involves professionals drawing on cumulative organisational and personal knowledge and practices, and using them in "a reflective conversation with the situation" (1987, p. 242). As such, reflection involves learning in and from experience, and in doing so gaining insights into people. Schön's conceptualisation views professional and management knowledge as an active and contextual practice based on self-awareness. It also serves as a tool for an ongoing review of peoples' experiences.

This type of constant and ongoing practice of self-reflection is called *theories-of use* by Argyris and **Schön (1974**). The authors also coined the term *theories-in-use* to signify what people do habitually and without much thought. Through critical reflection people can bring these theories into congruence.

In addition to the above, there are other theories, frameworks, and models that describe reflective processes, such as the single loop (reflection) and double loop (reflection and reflexivity) theory proposed by Argyris and Schön (1974). The single loop develops awareness and calls for actions but leaves underlying deeper structures untouched. Similarly, **Gibb's model (1998) focuses on a single event and adds thoughts, feelings, and sensemaking.** Johns (2017) developed a set of cues that focuses on the description of an event, one's feelings, one's knowledge, and one's personal values. Lastly, and similar to the concept of the double loop, Smith et al. (2015) proposed a set of questions known as DATA (describe, analyse, theorise, and act).The above models are limited and thus present a danger that reflectors will limit their answers to the questions without developing their own narratives.

Johns' Model of Structured Reflection (1995), used mostly in the healthcare field, offers a more reflexive approach. It is over-prescriptive and therefore has its disadvantages. It imposes an external framework and consequently leaves little scope for individuals to draw on their own intuitions, values, and priorities. Johns (1995) revised and developed his model, moving away from its prescriptive character in order to offer more holistic elements to encourage deeper reflection. The author describes reflection as being *mindful of self* –whether during or after experience*.* He further claims that it is a "developmental process of paying attention to and learning through everyday experiences, with the goal of realizing a vision of practice as a lived reality." (Johns 2009,15).

In my research, I drew partly on Johns' reflective approach, but also incorporated Schön's (1987) concept of swampy lowlands and Brookfield's (2009) critical reflection that uncover and investigate the paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal assumptions that inform how individuals practice and experience.

Students are often asked to provide feedback on the courses they complete. Although the feedback questions require the students to assess their own participation in the learning process, they do not contain a deep level of reflection. Moreover, learning diaries, which are often incorporated into courses, have a prescriptive approach whereby students are guided along throughout their reflection. Boud and Walker (1998) warn against such a 'manual' approach as it demands very little thinking, and it produces shallow reflection, and little learning for the student. Moreover, the assessment of such a task is also problematic, given the personal nature of reflections. I, therefore, conclude that neither providing feedback nor writing learning diaries provides a sufficient platform for students to develop reflexivity or boost their critical thinking.
Indeed, this paper proposes a pedagogical approach which specifically encourages students to think critically and reflect, thus enhancing their reflective skills as future professionals. Additionally, the proposed pedagogical approach strengthens students' confidence and self-efficacy.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is understood as one's ability to examine the relationship between the broader social "field" (in Bourdieu's (2004) terms, structure, networks, relationships) and how knowledge, practices and perceptions, and dispositions and identities are reflexively constructed and contested (Cunliffe, 2016).

Reflexivity focuses on understanding that individuals live *in* a social and natural world. They also create and shape it in intentional and unintentional ways. This influence also determines human responsibility for the words they use and the actions they take. In comparison to reflection, reflexivity delves deeper into questioning what is or what ideologies, personal assumptions, which underpin practices and policies, can be taken for granted.

Following Cunliffe and Jun (2005, 229) reflexivity can be self-critical and self-reflexive. Self-reflexivity involves "a dialogue with self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting. In this dialogue, we question our core beliefs and our understanding of particular events" (Cunliffe, 2016). Self-reflexivity helps individuals to recognise how their own practices and ways of relating impact how they and others construct social and organisational realities. Critical reflexivity examines normalising and disciplining, at times hegemonic and exclusionary, ideologies, as well as practices, policies, and discourses in organisations. In doing so, individuals can change systemic control structures that dominate discourse and practices. Archer (2007) discusses reflexivity as an internal conversation in which people can evaluate their social and institutional contexts.

From the perspective of teaching and learning reflexivity skills, it is important to point out an ontological differentiation between reflection and reflexivity. Whereas reflection relies on the objectivist premise that there is an outside world out there, reflexivity adopts and embraces a more subjectivist social constructionist ontology, which assumes that people create and live within their social and organisational realms in everyday interactions and conversations. Reflection is conceptualised and enacted as a cognitive process in which students apply logical thinking to an analysis of a situation and/or to themselves to achieve a result. For example, as mentioned earlier, when students reflect on their learning in learning diaries they shallowly reflect *on* their learning process by comparing themselves to objective social categories. They ponder questions such as: how could I have done better and been more active?

Reflexivity asks for a deeper analysis; the students revise their biases and assumptions and the way they impact their behaviour. Reflexivity requires the students to recognise their connection with others, as well as their lived social experiences. This requires an awareness of one's own behaviour. Therefore, while reflection moves people from perplexity to equilibrium/certainty, reflexivity moves people from equilibrium/certainty to doubt to new possibilities (Cunliffe, 2020).

The final paper length should be between 4 to 10 pages (including references). All pages size should be A4 (21 x 29,7cm). The top, bottom, right, and left margins should be 2,5 cm. All the text must be in one column and Arial font, including figures and tables, with single-spaced 10-point interline spacing. [Arial, 10 point, normal, justified alignment]

1 METHODOLOGY

My methodological approach stemmed from qualitative interpretation, and the method I applied was narrative analysis of the data generated by the students' reflective narratives. I adopted a constructivist perspective, as it emphasised the learners and their learning process first, thus downplaying my dominance as a teacher. This meant that my role as a teacher was limited to encouraging the students to learn by doing. The students did this by interacting and exchanging knowledge with others. They also reflected on reality in conversations with others: They used the language which came into being through discussions, argumentations and sharing views and opinions with others.

In order to ensure "qualitative rigour" (Gioia et al. 2013), while keeping an open mind, I adhered to a "systematic inductive approach to concept development" as devised by Gioia et al. (2013, 16). This approach allowed me to combine rigour and openness, as it assumed that the world is socially constructed by people who are "knowledgeable agents". In my analysis of the narratives, I first attempted to elicit possible themes that might emerge.

Following Saldana (2014), I applied in vivo codes. In the first-order analysis, I adhered very faithfully to the words and phrases used by the students. The codes were the words of the students themselves. I was aware of the importance of my immersion in the data and its impact on the validity of the findings. I carried out an additional reading of the narratives, and listed meaningful, recurrent ideas, and key issues in the data. Next, I tried to recognise explicit and implicit ideas in the narratives based on my own judgement. During the construction phase, I reflected on the process of organising codes. I compared them in terms of similarities and differences and divided them into groups. In the rectification phase, I checked and confirmed the clusters of codes in relation to the themes and categories yet again. I was aware that simultaneous immersion and distancing form the data may prevent me from taking a critical approach towards data analysis, thus hindering my ability to remain rigorous.

1.1 The process

1.1.1 Lecture

I introduced the concept of the value of reflexivity as a professional skill in an interactive lecture, during which the students were encouraged to ask questions and engage in a discussion. The students were given a homework assignment where they were asked to read and provide an academic summary of an article.

They were also asked to adopt what Finlay (2008) calls *reflective practice as introspection*, which invited students to engage in solitary self-dialogues in which they were asked to probe personal meanings and emotions. They expressed those dialogues by writing their own reflective narratives about the usefulness of reflection and reflexivity in learning and working. To ensure as much freedom of expression as possible, I did not give the students any guiding questions, no length limitation, and no specific template to follow. I assessed this activity based on the comprehensiveness of the academic summary and I graded it on the scale 1-5. I did not grade the personal reflection, but instead provided constructive feedback.

1.1.2 Reflection on action

The second activity introduced the students to the most salient theories in cultural studies. After an interactive lecture, the students were asked to write a reflective narrative: *Culture and I.* The task required the students to engage in intersubjective reflection (Finlay, 2008) which made them concentrate on relational cultural contexts and the emergent and negotiated nature of their cultural encounters, as well as reflect on their own cultural identity. They were asked to tune into their cultural encounters and situations over a period of ten days. They were asked to write their reflections as notes, short paragraphs, separate sentences, or any other forms of communication, based on their observations and experiences.

Similar to the previous activity, to ensure as much freedom of expression as possible I did not limit the length. I only provided a few general prompts and suggestions to guide the students. Here is an example of my instructions: *"This assignment is all about you and your cultural identity. Think about who you see yourself as in terms of your cultural belonging/non-belonging, what culture means to you, what you have experienced in different cross-cultural situations, and what you thought about it when it happened, how you felt, etc. The point of this assignment is to write thoughts, ideas, and reflections whenever something comes to your mind, every day, for example. Do not write it in one sitting. Real reflection happens all the time".* I based the assessment (as pass/fail) of this activity on the extent of reflexivity.

1.1.3 Story writing, story sharing

The third activity, story writing and storytelling, was aimed at enhancing the students' confidence in expressing themselves, giving and receiving feedback, and developing analytical and critical skills, all in the process of what I coined 'creative discovery'.

The students' task was to write a story (individually) prompted by a traditional 6-step story model (character/setting, the goal the character wants to achieve, the hindering powers, the assisting powers, turning point, resolution). The students were asked to follow a set of six cards, each corresponding to the steps of the story model, i.e., the first card depicted the character and the setting, the second card depicted the goals of the character, etc. The images on the cards were often abstract, thus encouraging the students to use their imaginations and construct their stories however they wanted.

After completing the individual task of writing the stories, the students worked in groups of four, where they shared their stories with three other students, thus engaging in what Ghaye (2000) calls *a reflective conversation*. Through mutual collaboration and conversation, a participatory, dialogical approach to reflective practice was achieved. Comments, peer feedback, and discussion followed. The groups of four identified the themes of each other's stories. The themes were then collected and analysed in a general discussion by the whole class.

Lastly, as part of the homework, the students were asked to write reflective narratives. Similar to the previous activities, to ensure as much freedom of expression as possible there was no length limitation and no template to follow. Only a few general prompts and suggestions were given. Here is an example of my instructions: *"After the storytelling activity carried out in class, write a reflection about the activity. Remember that reflective writing is like having a dialogue with yourself. Think about the creative process you went through, the themes in your story, the other themes in the group, and reflect on why you made a story with these themes and not others. What do they mean to you? Think about sharing the stories within the group, how did you feel doing this? What did you get out of this activity? Connect this activity to possible benefits you might have gained as a future business person and researcher. Please do not write this reflection as simple answers to the topics above. They are only there to guide you in case you are lost. Write more!"*

2 RESULTS

2.1 Introduction to reflexivity, reflecting on reflection (activity 1)

I was aware of some pedagogic concerns that teaching reflective practice entails. One of them was the developmental readiness of the students, and the extent to which forcing students to reflect may actually prove counterproductive. Some writers, for example Hobbs (2007); Girffin (2003), and Burrows (1995) posit that learners need to be developmentally ready to engage in critical reflection and that some individuals may be incapable of doing so. The respective abilities of 'novices' and 'experts' are relevant here. There is evidence that novices, by definition lacking 'practical mastery', are inclined to follow models mechanically, and that such reliance on models lessens with experience (Gordon, 1984). As a result, the reflection that does occur can only be less effective.

The findings of the study support this claim. The majority of the students provided their reflections, but it was clear that they focused mainly on writing the summary, as this part of the assignment was graded. Their reflections were short and, in some cases, lacking.

Another relevant pedagogic concern was related to the compulsory element in reflective practice. When students are required to reflect through learning and assessment exercises, reflections can end up being superficial, strategic, and guarded. Where assessment lurks, any genuine, critical self-examination may be discouraged. Even though the reflections in the study were not graded, less attention was paid to complete them in an in-depth manner. However, the reflective narratives of the students revealed themes that I grouped into the following categories: reflexivity, writing academic summaries, and reading academic articles.

When talking about reflexivity itself, the students described it as a collaborative activity and a vital skill.

> "Reflective practice has been a vital aspect of formulating my perspectives and understanding how to improve my behaviour."

> "Personally, I see this concept as an invaluable skill in academic and occupational settings as well as in life as a whole. Everyone does it organically to some extent, and I feel as though it cannot be forced. The idea of a novice not branching away from technical procedures rings true in my own life. I have been in many situations, specifically in academic settings, where I was able to improvise and come up with solutions on the spot only after getting my footing in the environment. I have been able to translate this to other parts of my life as well. I think the fact that I tend to be creative and "wing-it" a lot is somewhat just a part of who I have always been naturally, but it was also nurtured by the academic settings in which I inadvertently used skills and concepts consistent with reflective practice".

The students also referred to reflexivity as an interesting subject and helpful in self-development.

> "Self-reflection is a very important 'skill' that everyone should be able to do. It is a good thing when you can look at your past and reflect on what you've done so that you can better yourself for the future."

> "I have always found it very difficult to understand. It's thinking critically, but not exactly. So, what is it? I feel that this is partly because I ́m just not that interested in the subject. This time I decided to give it a shot and see what happens. I read the article and found it difficult to understand. So, I read it many times over and I had to translate the words that were new to me. I started to realize why this subject is important and how it will affect your personal ability to grow as a professional. I was also taken by the fact that the author mentions that this subject really is complex and understanding it is hard. This gave me the opportunity to be more forgiving towards myself, for not trying hard enough to understand the definition of reflections."

The students also mentioned learning aspects of the activity.

> "I did not have any knowledge on this topic beforehand, so I do hope I have learned somehow more about reflecting."

> "I do find that one's ability to able to use reflective practice can be really important and useful".

> "Doing this assignment will help me in future to respect reflective practice and to try to take into consideration wider aspects like organizational, political and economic issues as well."

> "Prior to reading this article, I would never have thought about the stages or types of reflection. I simply reflected by analysing what happened and then finding a solution. The article has broadened my knowledge of reflection and it offers some points that I will consider when reflecting in the future."

> "This kind of practice will surely be helpful for future studies and work. I'm sure it is a vital skill to be able to point out the main subject from a conversation or from an article."

When referring to writing and reading academic article the students expressed difficulties, but also readiness to learn.

> "The summary task was really hard because the academic text was very hard to understand. I'm sure, it will be easier when I get used to it."

> "I have never written a summary before, but I think I did a good job as most (if not all) key ideas and subjects have been covered. It was good rehearsing the in-text referencing as it is something, I have previously never done either. All in all, I am happy with the result I have produced."

Table 1 below illustrates the learning objectives set against the learning outcomes described by the themes identified by the students' narratives.

Table 1. Reflexivity: learning objectives vs outcomes, themes identified by the students

LEARNING OBJECTIVES	LEARNING OUTCOMES
Introduction to the concept of reflection and reflexivity	New concept
Application of critical skills	Vital skill, helpful in self-development
Development of academic analytical skills	Challenging, difficult
Writing academic summaries	Challenging, difficult
Writing critical reflective narratives	Challenging, difficult

It clearly shows that the learning objectives set by main activity 1 were achieved. Even though the students found it difficult to read and understand the academic article, they submitted the completed assignment to the best of their abilities with enthusiasm and readiness to learn.

2.2 Writing reflectively about one's own cultural identity, reflection in action (activity 2)

The analysis of the reflective narratives *Culture and I* revealed different themes identified by the students, depending on the students' national belonging and the nature and longevity of their residence in Finland. The themes were clustered into four categories: Awareness and Negativity (among Finnish students), Awareness and Openness (among foreigners: temporary sojourners), Awareness and Cultural Identity Work (among foreigners: permanent residents), Awareness and Ambiguity (among students with mixed cultural roots).

The narratives of all the Finnish students showed an enhanced awareness of their cultural identity characterised by negativity. However, the awareness also triggered varied thoughts and emotions depending on the students' previous experiences. Within the group of the Finnish students, the Finns permanently residing in Finland expressed, on the one hand, anxiety and negative emotions about being Finnish, as well as a sense of not belonging in Finland. On the other hand, other students expressed strong adherence to being Finnish.

> "I see myself very attached to my culture when I have guests. Today I had guests and, in my culture, especially in Carelian culture, it is very important to make your guests feel good and feed them well. I was able to see that in myself today."

> "Finnish culture is a very prominent part of my cultural identity and thus when I go to the bus stop or metro stops I always smile at the fact that in Helsinki people don't really mind if they stand close to others or sit next to strangers, its normal here. Although, it is a ridiculous thing to do I do think it demonstrates how content we are with ourselves, we don't need or crave the closeness of others all the time and we are happy just being there and perhaps observing what is going on. I think it also shows trust is not just given but it has to be earned."

"I realised that Finnish customer service is so different compared to Finns' normal interaction and behavior. Finnish customer service is very open and happy and usually a salesperson is very talkative. Now that I think about it more, it feels odd."

"For a Finn, having your own space is important and it is really easy to see it in public places, such as trams, buses, gyms... I can also notice myself looking for a place that has less people around me".

"I've never felt myself as a true Finn. I've always felt a little more comfortable when talking to people with other cultural backgrounds, especially with Canadians. While I was admiring the scenery of small lakes and lush forests, and enjoying myself a Finnish craft beer, I thought to myself: This is one of the only few situations it feels good to be in Finland and being a Finn in general".

The Finnish students who had experiences of living outside of Finland expressed culture shock upon return. All the Finnish students pointed out a desire to travel abroad to learn and adopt different cultural habits. Most of the Finnish students, permanently residing in Finland, expressed negative emotions when referring to their cultural roots.

"I know it reads Finland in my passport but at certain age I tried to get rid of Finnish culture in me. I never felt I fit in Finnish society and always felt better abroad. Finnish culture seemed so dark, grim, and unhappy. At least in historical way. There were some Finnish culture traits that I adored or liked. The Finnish spirit, but then it all went down, and I don't see it anymore."

Foreign students staying in Finland on a temporary basis (temporary sojourners) i.e., exchange students, expressed strong cultural awareness characterised by openness. They were very curious about Finnish culture, they often made comparisons between habits and customs in their own cultures and Finnish culture, and often expressed a preference of Finnish ways. They were eager to learn new Finnish ways. In many cases they identified experiencing culture shock, especially regarding education. Here are excerpts from the narratives of exchange students.

Exchange student from Austria:

"The Finns are never saying anything, and they are also not staring at me. They give you the privacy needed because they do that here in Finland. I have to say, it is really nice to have this amount of privacy in the gym here but sometimes it is also a bit boring because no one is ever having a conversation with you".

Exchange student from Russia:

"I personally think that in Finland is well-being on such a high level, that Finns do not appreciate it. Almost every day in the school there are a few Finnish classmates, who complain about almost everything. It annoys me so much, because I think that student at the university should have another attitude."

"Sometimes I am thinking about that, that maybe the school should have had more difficult entrance exams cause some people just should not be there. I do not feel comfortable if I say that it is too easy; everyone stares at me because of what I said. There is lack of motivation among students, I think that is because of the fact, that the majority cannot imagine worse school system or condition of life. I can".

Exchange student from Slovakia:

"I recognised that the young people here are divided into 2 groups. The first one is, that the people are engaged or in serious relationship, and the second one is the extreme opposite, that they do want just the freedom and time for themselves. I wonder why it is so. In Slovakia, the majority of people in my age want to have the proper relationships, because they know that as they are aging it is more difficult to find someone who fits. Here the people think more about today, not future. Have no plans, goals, dreams".

Foreign students residing in Finland permanently expressed cultural awareness characterised by cultural identity work. Their narratives revealed the following themes: amazement and frustration, adherence to and pride in their own culture, comparisons between their native cultures and Finland, attempts to combine both cultures.

"My culture is a combination of two different cultures, Finnish and Filipino. My values are a combination of the two, but I do not agree with all values of both cultures".

"Last 9 years I have been living in Finland and become Finn by passport. I don't feel myself belonging to modern Ukrainians and still cannot belong to Finns. My identity formed, by my past does not exist anymore. Currently I am on crossroad."

The final group of students was students with mixed cultural identities. Their narratives expressed cultural awareness characterised by awareness and ambiguity, and revealed the following themes:

tension and frustration (who am I?), a sense of being located in-between, a sense of necessity to reject one culture to create space for another (preferred) culture, and lastly, disappointment and confusion.

> "I had an identity crisis until a family friend asked me: Where do you think you are from? It took me a while to formulate my answer, but I concluded that, I am mentally Japanese and physically Finnish. Specifically, I am mentally Japanese since I grew up with Japanese values, morals and mental behavior. On the other hand, I am physically Finnish since I use Finnish in my daily physical life. "

> "Sometimes though, as I rely too much on being aware of where my heritage comes from, I feel that I easily lose grip of who I truly am, instead of where my heritage comes from. Even though cultural heritage is a big part of one's identity, I feel as if it may also hinder you from grasping who you are when all those stories of cultural diversity is stripped away".

Table 2. Culture and I; learning objectives vs. outcomes; themes based on students' reflections

LEARNING OBJECTIVES	LEARNING OUTCOMES
Becoming culturally self-aware	Awareness and ambiguity
Becoming culturally aware of others	Awareness and negativity
Developing cultural understanding of self and others	Awareness and openness
Learning the concepts of cultural studies	"Connecting theory to me"
Reflecting critically on own cultural identity	"Good to think of who we are"

2.3 Story writing, storytelling, writing reflectively, reflecting on action (activity 3)

The reflective narratives created by the students after the class activity revealed an abundance of themes. They were aggregated into the following categories: Unconventional Learning, Creativity, Surprise and Discovery, Expressing True Self, and Knowing Others. Additionally, the students made clear connections of storytelling activity to business life (Storytelling and Business).

The following excerpts from the students' reflective narratives highlight the unconventional way of learning and its connection to enhancing creativity and building confidence.

> "This assignment gave me more courage to read out texts written by me. Also, it was very different to other assignments we have had so it was great fun. In business life it must also be crucial to have imagination and courage, and I think these are the things I got out of this activity".

> "I enjoyed this practice and hope to see more this kind of work. I can implement these to my future and to business too. You have to be very creative in marketing for example, but it goes to all business in general. How you write your CV, how you tell your personal story in interview etc. It was fun assignment, something to deviate from the norm".

The narratives also showed that the students felt encouraged to express themselves both by writing their stories and sharing them with their peers.

> "I was confident about sharing my story, because we had to write it quick and I think it is not a problem to me to write stories. Of course, I was not 100% confident, but I got it through. I did not really understand the meaning of this exercise, but it helped me to use my imagination and to be brave enough to share my story to others, even if it would be silly".

> "This session taught me to be brave and show my work to others no matter how silly I think it is because in the end of the day the people in my group also had an equally silly but thrilling story as well. Although sceptical at first on the importance of the story telling idea in the end I learnt a great deal on how even silly things have a meaning behind them and how you interpret it is one hundred percent on you without

any limits and judgment. It will help me in the future to envision anything even thought it might not make sense in the beginning".

The excerpts below highlight the reflections on Expressing True Self and Knowing Others.

"Business can be strenuous in whatever field you are specialising, but if you focus on releasing your emotions, whether it be through storytelling or reflective practice, a person is able to lighten their emotional load. Storytelling can be a 'less direct' approach to reflective writing, because instead of directly writing about your feelings, you are indirectly expression your emotions".

"This is also an invaluable tool in business because getting multiple perspectives on a problem can open many paths to a solution instead of just one".

"It showed me that lots of people have similarities even when they come from different cultures and backgrounds. By searching for those similarities, I should be able to form effective partnerships and teams in business which can hopefully propel me to success".

The excerpts below highlight the reflections on Creativity, Surprise and Discovery

"When I saw the cards I got handed out, first I thought it would be almost impossible for me to connect them into a story. But as I started writing, after a while I got into that magical world of the cards and I enjoyed it a lot".

"When I started, suddenly I could not stop writing. I wanted to have the story with deep meaning and interesting characters. It took me some time because my story was a bit long, but that did not bother me because I liked the process".

"This activity enhanced my imagination and creativity".

The excerpts below highlight the reflections on connections between Storytelling and Business

"I think storytelling is a very important part of business. You need to be able to present yourself, your company and the products you are selling to an audience and storytelling is a great way to do that. I want to specialise in marketing as a part of my degree, so I feel like the skill of storytelling will be even more important than it would be if I majored in finance."

"I can see that storytelling has very much to do with business. People in different roles need the skill to create a good story to support for example a product. With a good story it is possible to stand out from the others. People in marketing, sales, entrepreneurs, and so on can use storytelling in their lives and careers".

"For a businessperson it is important to be creative and sometimes the creativity has to come fast and I think that this activity was good for practicing that".

Through the activity of story writing and storytelling, the students experienced an opportunity to overcome the initial confusion when faced with the task of creating coherent stories based on abstract images. As they began the creative process of writing, they realised that the task became not only easy but also enjoyable. Enjoyment triggered creativity, and as the stories emerged the realisation of completing a seemingly impossible task created additional enjoyment. The initial confusion by the requirements of the task was overcome by the process of writing and was superseded by the discovery that, just by doing, one can overcome initial difficulties. This was followed by a discovery of the value of the assignment. The non-judgmental environment of small groups in which the stories were shared, as well as positive peer feedback, not only encouraged self-expression, but also created an opportunity to get to know one's self and others in a meaningful way. Table 3 below illustrates the learning objectives vs outcomes.

Table 3. Story writing, storytelling; learning objectives vs. outcomes; based on students' reflections

LEARNING OBJECTIVES	LEARNING OUTCOMES
Encouraging creativity and innovative thinking	Confusion, discovery, surprise
Developing critical thinking skills	Building confidence
Strenghtening writing skills	Confidence in writing

Enhancing active listening skills	Expressing true self and knowing others
Developing communication and argumentation skills	Encouraged self-expression

During participation in the class activities, and when reflecting on them afterwards, the students went through a developmental learning process during which they were asked to pay attention to their reactions, and analyse and reflect on them in order to realise their part in the lived reality as well as their learning process (Johns, 2007). The activities created situations where the students investigated and reflected on their personal paradigmatic assumptions about themselves and others. By carrying out a critical reflection (Brookfield, 2009), they discovered, scrutinised, and questioned the assumptions that informed the way they experienced, perceived, and practiced.

Dewey's (1933) concept of reflection as a manner of thinking that stems from doubt, confusion and hesitation resonated in the data obtained from the reflective narratives of the students. Faced with the task of creating a coherent story out of abstract and confusing images triggered a reaction and a sense of confusion (How can I do this? Why am I doing this in a business communication course?), followed by doubt (I do not think I can do it. I cannot write a story), and fear (What if I cannot do it?). All these reactions were triggered by a situation in which the students faced an experience of dealing with seemingly impossible tasks. Despite the initial confusion, doubt, hesitation, and fear, prompted by the requirements of completing the storytelling assignment on time, the students began the writing process. The fear they experienced at the beginning was overcome and turned into a positive, creative process as the stories began taking shape on paper, and the unconscious learning process began.

The creative pull that the assignment called for cleared the confusion, dispersed the doubts, and encouraged the students to overcome their fears. They learned by doing and reflecting on the activity afterward. Their learning was not limited only to learning about the actual activity they took part in, but also about themselves as actors performing in that activity. They experienced another stage in the learning process: discovery and surprise. They discovered the potential of innovative ways of dealing with a difficult task and experienced a sense of surprise when they were able to perform successfully.

When reflecting on their own cultural identities, the students experienced being lost in the swampy lowlands (Schön 1987) where they became aware of their implicit knowledge of themselves, and where they were encouraged to reflect more deeply, which Johns(2007) describes as being "mindful of self". The students went through a developmental learning process that lasted ten days. During this period, they were asked to pay attention to their everyday experiences and analyse and reflect on them to realise their part in the lived reality (Johns, 2007). They were also in a situation where they had to investigate and reflect on their personal paradigmatic assumptions about themselves and others. By carrying out acritical reflection (Brookfield, 2009), they discovered the assumptions that informed the way they experienced, perceived, and practiced. Finally, the element of discovery and surprise of learning in a different and unconventional answers way moved the students' thinking away from routine and conventional ways of learning where the external authority of a teacher guides them in their learning. Instead, they experienced deep levels of learning in a relaxed and fun atmosphere, where there were no wrong or right, and where any student's input was accepted and acknowledged as valuable, both by the peers and the teacher.

3   CONCLUSIONS

The three learning activities incorporated into International Business Communication were designed to answer the need to develop critical reflexivity skills of undergraduate business students, to prepare them for the demands of future working life as professional businesspersons. The reflective narratives showed that storytelling proved to be an unconventional and innovative means to learn and discover. Whilst having fun, the students developed and learned skills that were identified as crucial for future business professionals and researchers. These skills were critical analytical skills, empathy (self-and others awareness), awareness of the general environment, confidence in tackling challenging and unexpected tasks, creative problem solving, discovering, and believing in one's own creative potential. These skills significantly contributed to strengthening the reflexivity skills.

I see this as the first step in the further development of deeper analytical and critical skills, cultural awareness, communication confidence, and self-efficacy of young graduates as they face real-life practical situations in business and academia alike.

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