Writing Effective Reflections

When we reflect, we consider our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours surrounding past experiences (Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002). By reflecting, we are better able to associate personal meaning with, and build connections between, our past experiences in a unique and authentic way (Gorlewski & Greene, 2011; Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002). As such, the purpose of writing a reflection is multi-pronged. Reflective writing allows us to:

1. examine personal reactions to experiences;
2. identify and explore new associations; and
3. make connections to different experiences and events (Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that reflective skills are beneficial in higher education (e.g., Reidsema & Mort, 2009). The broad range of theoretical underpinnings for reflective thinking — from psychological (Dewey, 1933) to critical social theory (Leonard, 2004) — supports the notion that reflection can be used in a variety of disciplines and fields (Ryan, 2011). Regardless of which discipline and field you are in, reflective skills can help you to become a more mindful learner and “thereby become more aware of what [you] are learning, how [you] are learning, and the value of [your] learning” (Fink, 2004, p. 97) through the improvement of critical thinking and analytical skills (Kennison & Misselwitz, 2000).

Reflective skills have been shown to not only improve learning, but also improve teaching development for instructors. By evaluating your behaviour in the classroom alongside educational theories put forward by research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), you can shape your teaching practice and philosophy to be consistent with new evidence (e.g., Poole & Simmons, 2013) and become more cognizant of yourself not only as a learner but also as a teacher (Kathpalia & Heath, 2008).

What are the characteristics of a great reflection?

Reflective thinking and writing requires practice (Rodgers, 2002) and critical thinking (Reidsema & Mort, 2009). It can be difficult to start writing a reflection, so a good first step is to create an outline. By creating an outline, you are not only thinking about the material, but you are simultaneously organizing your thoughts into a logical and coherent structure. Toole and Toole (1995) propose a three-step model to guide your reflective writing:

**Step 1: What?**

Begin by describing the event or experience you want to reflect on. This can sometimes be done prior to the event. For example, you may think about your goals or anticipated outcomes associated with the experience. After your experience, you may ask yourself:

- What was my first impression?
- What was my role in this experience?
- What did I experience?
Step 2: So what?
Next, move from describing the event to thinking more critically and analyzing the experience. This stage is a key component of reflective writing. For example, you can answer questions such as:

- How did this experience affect me?
- What did I learn about others?
- What did I learn about myself?
- Have any of my opinions changed?
- Will I make different decisions?

Step 3: Now what?
In this stage, reflect on how this experience will change your thoughts/feelings/behaviours in the future. Ask yourself:

- How will this experience affect my teaching development?
- How will this experience contribute to my future?
- How can I transfer the skills I learned in this experience into my daily activities?

Kennison & Misselwitz (2002) have developed sample prompts for statements that may help you start your reflective writing:

- I thought...
- I believe...
- I feel...
- It surprised me to find out...
- This is important to me because...
- This has affected the way I think/feel about...

After you have written your reflection, you can ensure you have a strong reflection by asking yourself these questions:

- Have I provided a detailed description?
- Have I identified how this experience may affect my professional development?
- Have I identified how this experience may affect my teaching practice in the future?

Reflection for TA/GAs
For a TA/GA in the role of an instructor, it is essential to reflect on beliefs, opinions, and behaviours surrounding teaching, as these will ultimately affect the classroom environment (Han, 1995). As a specific example, TA/GAs are continuously being faced with challenges that require responses and solutions. Reflection allows TA/GAs to identify whether their responses were well received or need improvement, and ways that these responses can be altered to meet future challenges (e.g., Han, 1995).

The following are ways that TA/GAs in the role of an instructor can reflect on their teaching practice:

- **Self-reflection:** Following a tutorial, lecture, or workshop, reflect on your experiences. What things worked? What things didn’t work? Could you make different decisions next time?
- **Peer Observation:** If you are new to teaching, take the opportunity to have a faculty member observe your classroom and provide feedback. Reflect on this feedback to improve your teaching practice.
- **Student Feedback:** Ask students for feedback on your teaching. Students can provide anonymous feedback through an established questionnaire or open-ended questions, and you can use the
feedback as a starting point for reflective thought.

- **Open Door Program:** The Learning & Teaching Office provides TA/GAs and other faculty the opportunity to observe award-winning professors in the classroom. This experience can allow you to reflect on the strategies that these faculty use in their teaching, and potentially adapt these strategies into your own teaching practice.

Reflection gives you the opportunity to meaningfully engage with your experiences in the classroom by thinking more critically about your opinions, thoughts, and feelings surrounding them. As a Ryerson graduate student or TA/GA, you may be interested in Ryerson’s Professional Development Program (PDP) which provides many opportunities for reflection. One of these opportunities is writing SEDA reflections. For a more detailed description of writing SEDA reflections, please refer to the tip sheet in the PDP course shell in D2L.

**Work Cited**


Poole, G., & Simmons, N. (2013). The contributions of the scholarship of teaching and learning to quality enhancement in Canada. In G. Gordon, & R. Land (Eds.), *Quality enhancement in higher


