Best Practices

Incorporating Reflective Writing
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Reflection is a skill that allows a learner to “use cognitive, affective, imaginative, and creative means to perceive, represent in language, and thereby undergo one’s lived experience,” to create a clear narrative of their own identity, self-awareness, intersubjectivity, and ethical discernment (Charon & Hermann, 2013, p. 3). In essence, reflection can be explained as a process that gives individuals an opportunity to consider their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours surrounding past events, and identify different, and sometimes better, ways to respond in the future (Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002; Ruland & Ahem, 2007). Reflection as a learning objective is commonly indicated as the highest level of understanding in seminal taxonomies such as Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956).

Closely associated with, and required for, reflection is the skill of critical thinking. If critical thinking is a learning outcome in your course, reflective writing is particularly beneficial and fundamental to improving critical thinking skills in students (Ruland & Ahem, 2007). Additionally, if students learn to reflect, they can transfer these skills to practical applications in the real world, regardless of their field or discipline. For example, Woods, Felder, Rugarcia, and Stice (2000) suggest that teaching reflection in engineering strengthens teamwork skills as reflective students will be more able to “sense” if their team is working well or identify challenges that need to be addressed.

In this issue of *Best Practices*, we will review how to incorporate reflection into your teaching and how to evaluate reflective writing fairly.

Incorporating Reflective Writing Into Your Teaching

If you are interested in incorporating reflective skills into your teaching, ensure that this is communicated in your course syllabus as well as in lectures by facilitating activities that allow students to practice this skill (Woods et al., 2000). Some students may not be open to the idea of reflection, particularly if you teach in a discipline that does not typically practice reflective skills. To increase the likelihood of buy-in from your students, raise awareness of the benefits and real world practical applications of reflection. In addition, present reflective skills with the same degree of respect and passion as you would with other components of the course (Woods et al., 2000).

To help students strengthen their critical thinking and reflective skills, students must move beyond the surface of learning or observing and engage with the content on a higher level (Woods et al., 2000). One way to facilitate this learning is by including reflective writing assignments into your curriculum. These do not have to be lengthy assignments requiring heavy marking; a short paragraph asking students to reflect on a demonstration or particular component of the course is sufficient.

For example, Mezirow’s (1990) framework for reflective writing specifies three types of reflection:

1. **Content reflection**: reflecting on the specific event or experience;
2. **Process reflection**: reflecting on how to respond to the event or experience; and
3. **Premise reflection**: reflecting on underlying theories, opinions, or values about the event or experience.
One way to incorporate reflection into your course is to direct students to track their thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs, for example, by asking students to be mindful of these things when they are participating in problem-solving (Woods et al., 2000). To help facilitate this sort of reflective thinking, Woods and colleagues (2000) provide some suggestions of questions you can pose to your class:

- Why am I answering this problem?
- How many options do I have? Which option is the best choice?
- Is there any additional information that I need?
- Now that I have successfully solved this problem, what other problems can I solve?

Hahnemann (1986) suggests incorporating reflection by asking students to write journal entries throughout the course. One way to do this is to provide students with some fundamental questions related to the course content at the beginning of the semester and ask them to respond to those questions throughout the term. Reidsema and Mort (2009), for example, used reflective writing tasks to assist first-year engineering students in thinking about the different stages of the design process. For instance, as part of a group project to develop a problem statement, students were asked to reflect on the experience and then evaluate the reflections of their peers. Subsequent steps in the design process were evaluated similarly.

**Evaluating Reflective Writing**

To ensure that students take reflective writing seriously and actively participate in the process, evaluating reflections for a grade is imperative (Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002). Considering reflective skills fall within the category of process skills which are associated primarily with values, beliefs, and opinions, evaluating and assessing reflections may be particularly difficult (Woods et al., 2000). When assessing reflections, the role of the teacher is to understand and assess the level of critical thought demonstrated rather than assess and judge the content of the reflection (Charon & Herman, 2013). To ensure fair evaluation, it is best to use a pre-established, standardized rubric for reflections (Woods et al., 2000).

Although each course and reflective assignment will require an individualized rubric, Wald, Borkan, Taylor, Anthony, and Reis (2012) have developed a rubric to assess reflective writing. This rubric, which they have named The Reflection Evaluation for Learners’ Enhanced Competencies Tool (REFLECT), was developed to guide and evaluate reflective writing in medical education, but it can be adapted to any discipline (Wald et al., 2012). The researchers propose that the first step in assessing reflection is to first read the entire piece of writing. Following this, the assessor evaluates detailed components of the reflection, and then evaluates the reflection as a whole (Wald et al., 2012). The fundamental question that assessors should be asking is: Does this piece of writing move past description or summary, and offer a critical reflection of beliefs, opinions, and values? (Wald et al., 2012).

Unlike rubrics for more conventional pieces of academic writing, the REFLECT rubric includes criteria like “Presence of the writer,” “Description of conflict” and “Attending to emotions.” The levels of achievement for these criteria, rather than moving from “unsatisfactory” to “excellent,” move from “Habitual action (nonreflective)” to “Critical reflection.” As an example, under the criterion “Writing Spectrum,” the lowest level of achievement, “Habitual action,” is defined as “Superficial descriptive writing approach (fact reporting, vague impressions) without reflection or introspection, while as the highest level of achievement, “Critical reflection,” is defined as “Exploration and critique of assumptions, values, beliefs, and/or biases and the consequences of action (present and future).

See Wald et al. for a copy of the [REFLECT rubric](2012). For more information on assessment and evaluation in general, please refer to [Ryerson’s Learning & Teaching Office (LTO) website](#).
Work Cited


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