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What is Reflective Learning Journal?

It is a piece of writing which allows students to record thoughts and insights about their own learning experience. It encourages students to review and consolidate learning, to evaluate performance, to plan future learning based on past learning experience. In such a way, students become capable to take charge of their own learning, and eventually to develop into independent life long learners.

The term “*Reflection*” has been used widely colloquially and in academic disciplines, such as psychology and education. Nevertheless, in both settings, it simply means the process of thinking deeply with one’s awareness and conscious effort on an issue or event. The product of such a highly engaged cognitive process would be informing insights, strategies, plans and predictions on the issue one vigorously ponders upon.

Psychologist and educators further differentiate two kinds of reflective thinking: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The former suggests a *simultaneous monitoring* when performing or practicing a task; the latter suggests a retrospective evaluation after the task is accomplished.

With the meaning of the word “reflection” bears, writing something reflective becomes very meaningful and fruitful in the process of learning, which is one of the reasons why the use of *Reflective Learning Journal* in teaching has a rather long history. Reflective learning journal is well-accepted by many educators and teachers because it helps students to narrow the gaps between theories and practice, and most importantly heightens students’ felt need of constantly monitoring their learning progress. Learning should not be a passive process of simply in-taking information from teachers and lecturers, but rather an active process that requires a lot of personal thinking and questioning.

By encouraging your students to write reflective journal regularly, they will find in it a personal space for them to keep records of their own ideas and thoughts, and which these thoughts are useful for themselves to come up with solutions and novel approaches to get around problems encountered in their course of learning.

In this guide, we provide all necessary information you need to implement reflective journal writing in your course. Give it a try!

Positive outcomes expectable

- ✓ Students can gain a clearer overview of their learning progress
- ✓ Students can gain an insight of their own strengths and weaknesses as a learner
- ✓ Students can realise learning strategies which suit their personal needs
- ✓ Students will become more capable in planning for overcoming learning difficulties
- ✓ Students will understand and appreciate the importance self-evaluation in the role of improving oneself

Designing a Reflective Learning Journal

The structure of reflective learning journal

A journal can be structured with guiding questions (see our *Prompt Questions Bank*) or unstructured, in which students are asked to write about anything related to the subject or to their learning. An over-structured journal prevents reflective thinking, while an overly unstructured one might not encourage reflection to be made either.

Structured reflective learning journal

The example below is a highly structured kind of journal with specific questions that students have to answer in each entry. In particular, these questions aim at leading students to find out difficulties they encountered during the process of learning, also to provide themselves with plans and remedies in order to solve these problems.

This kind of reflective journal is suitable for courses with regular tasks of similar nature, like mathematics. This form of reflective journal is ideal and most effective for helping your students to realize their problems. However, it forgoes the space for them to have personal reflection, which also is an important component for cultivating a lifelong learner.

Writing your Reflective Learning Journal

This course composes of different teaching and learning activities, such as lecture, tutorial, discussion, take-home assignment, presentation.

In the entry, you might want to write something about each of these activities with the help of the following questions:

- What points you've learnt from the activities?
- How do I do in the activities?
- Give one or two examples of your most successful acts in the activities. Try to explain what things you did that made them successful
- Give one or two examples, if relevant, of errors or less successful acts in the activities. What did you do wrong or fail to do in each case
- The next time you confront a similar situation, what if anything, could you do differently to increase your learning?

Notes:

- Although a structured reflective journal contains specific questions to be answered, this should be executed with a fair amount of flexibility to avoid trivial entries of little significance to the development of students' learning.
- Similarly, make sure your students understand that answering the questions is not the purpose of keeping a reflective journal, that things outside the area covered by the questions may also be included.

Unstructured reflective learning journal

This type of reflective journal is characterized by little prompt questions provided, which gave students the greatest freedom to ponder upon things that had the greatest personal significance to them. This regular writing exercise helped students organise their thoughts, reflect on their work, identify problems, and find solution to them independently.

However, students often felt confused and uncertain about what to write in this highly unstructured piece of writing. Therefore, it is recommendable to give simple instructions and jump-start questions to give students a lift, but these questions do not necessarily confine the structure or intrude the personal quality of students' writing. See the following template:

Writing your Reflective Learning Journal

This course composes of different teaching and learning activities, such as lecture, tutorial, discussion, take-home assignment, presentation.

In each journal entry, you might therefore want to write down your reaction, comment, personal feelings, suggestion to each of these teaching and learning activities. For example, you can start by thinking:

- What's my interest in the course?
- What's my interest in the lecture?
- What's my reaction to a particular topic in this lecture?
- What's my opinion on the content of the course?
- How do I like the format of each of the above teaching and learning activities?
- How can I relate other things directly or indirectly to things that I have learnt in the course?

Notes:

- This piece of writing should be highly unstructured, therefore it's important that the guided questions provided should be very open-ended, so that allow students to carry deep thinking on course-related issues
- Only a few guided questions will do, otherwise, students will be overwhelmed and divert all their energy in attempting all the questions instead of taking a quality reflection on their learning

The Prompt Question Bank

Facilitating reflective thinking

Asking students to write reflective journal seems easy at the first glance. However, students often get lost and frustrated, and simply resort to reporting as many events as possible. Students complain a lot and cry for guidelines to help them write good reflective journal.

We believe only when students can correctly understand and carry out the process of reflective thinking, they can become genuine independent learners. To facilitate your students' reflective thinking you may include prompting questions in the Guide. This Prompt Questions Bank is a collection of questions for this purpose.

Organisation of the Prompt Questions Bank

In this Bank, the prompting questions are systematically organised according to the following dimensions:

Three elements of metacognitive reflection

The backbone of the Prompt Question Bank is a sequence of metacognitive reflections composing of the three essential metacognitive abilities for independent, reflective learners. They are:

- **Awareness** of one's learning experience
- **Evaluation** of the experience
- **Regulation** in attitude and behaviour for better performance and more fruitful experience

Focuses of reflection

It is sometimes useful to provide students with focuses of reflection. This prevents them from getting frustrated as a result of not knowing where to begin. It is also a means to direct your students' reflection to areas you particularly want them to develop.

In the Prompt Questions Bank, we provide two sets of focuses: one explores the learning experience itself, the other thinks about the learning experience in relation to one's academic, professional and personal development.

The first set "Explore a learning experience" deals with the specific and the immediate. This helps improve their performance. The focuses of reflection are:

- **Content** - the 'what's of the learning experience
- **Process** - the 'how's of the learning experience
- **Reasons** - the 'why's of the learning experience

The second set concerns long-term issues and widening the perspective of students, helping them see the relevance of and appreciate what they are learning. It engages students to think of a learning experience in relation to their...

- **Academic development**
- **Professional development**
- **Personal development**

The Prompt Questions Bank (Also known as 'Reflection Menu')

Area 1 <i>Explore a learning experience...</i> 			
	Awareness	Evaluation	Regulation
Content (What)	What have I learnt?	Do I understand what I have learnt? What else do I need to learn?	What can I do in order to gain a better understanding? Where can I find more information?
Process (How)	How did I learn / do it? What strategy have I used in learning this topic?	How effective is this strategy?	How can I make this strategy more effective? Is the way I do it the best way?
Reasons (why)	Why learn it? What is learning?	Why would I think so? Is this the only purpose of learning?	What would be a more useful way to understand learning? How could this learning experience be interpreted differently? 
Area 2 <i>Think of a learning experience in relation to...</i>			
	Awareness	Evaluation	Regulation
Academic development	How does this learning experience contribute to my academic development? What is/are my short-term / long-term academic goal(s)? What obstacles have I encountered?	What does this learning experience tell about my choice of academic goal and path? Am I making good progress? Am I on the right track? What is the source of the obstacles? Am I on the right track?	All things considered, is this goal a suitable goal? Are there any other options? What other paths can I take to achieve my goals? How can I remove those obstacles? What other paths can I take to achieve my goals?
Professional development	Same as academic development, just that this time think about the learning experience in relation to your professional development instead of academic development.		
Personal development	What does this learning experience mean to me? How does it matter to me if I failed or succeeded?	What does this learning experience tell me about my potentials, and myself as a person?	What do I know about myself? How am I living the most of myself?

Using the bank creatively

There are numerous ways to use the bank. Here are a few ideas that we could offer:

Option 1: Random selection

This is a quick and easy way to build in tips and prompts to your student guide for a more unrestricted kinds of reflective learning journal. Use a list of randomly selected questions to trigger thoughts in students when their ideas run dry.

Option 2: Choosing a focus of reflection

Choose the *focus of reflection*, which you might want your students to reflect the most on, then you can simply use the blocks of questions in that category as suggested in the Prompt Question Bank in order to guide your students through.

Option 3: Reflection Menu

Instead of selecting the reflective questions for your students, you can allow them to make the choices themselves. This has the advantage of further developing their independence and metacognitive abilities. (You may use the guidelines below with Reflection Menu as the 'detail guidelines' of your students' guidebook)

Reflection Menu

What to reflect on?

One important step in completing this reflective journal is to select your own reflection questions to reflect on from the Reflection Menu.

In the Reflection Menu, there are two areas of reflection, each representing three focuses of reflection.

You have the choice of reflecting on which focus(es) in each entry.

But at the end of this semester, you should have reflected on every focus for at least once.

Some suggestions:

Reflect on one or more focuses for each entry.

You are not required to answer all the questions. They are only there to help you.

But you are strongly advised to go through all three stages (awareness, evaluation and regulation) every time to get the full benefit of the exercise.

Tips:

- ☺ You might find it hard to limit yourself to the focuses of reflection as soon as you start writing. Follow your mind and go where it takes you.
- ☺ If that is the case, you could use the menu as a checklist to see what you have covered this time. Start from one of those you have left out next time.

Writing your own prompt questions

Our list is non-exhaustive, feel free to use your own prompting questions if ours couldn't do the best job for you! There are no rules in how to write the best questions for guiding reflective thinking. But there are certain things that might be useful to consider when you write your own prompt questions. Here we shall describe those we have used in building our Prompt Question Bank, for your reference.

Metacognitive reflection

The backbone of the Prompt Question Bank is a sequence of metacognitive reflections – the **awareness** of one's learning experience, the **evaluation** of the experience, and the **regulation** of one's attitude and behaviour for better performance and more fruitful experience. They are elements of one's metacognitive abilities that enable one to become better than oneself, i.e. to grow, and reflection is the mediating process essential to the development and operation of these abilities. Therefore it is recommendable that when you write your own prompt questions set, bear in mind sequence of metacognitive reflections so that your questions may guide your students towards developing themselves as independent, reflective learners.

1. *Awareness of one's learning experience*

Awareness of the current state is a necessary prerequisite of any conscious improvement. Students often do their study without knowing much about their current state of learning (e.g. how they learn, why they learn, etc). Reflective learning journal is a good place for one to start noticing their learning experiences.

2. *Evaluation of the experience*

Between being aware of one's learning experience and taking steps to do better is a stage where judgements must be made. An evaluation of the current state identifies problems and creates a felt need for change. It is sometimes useful to provide some criteria for evaluation. For example, in the prompt question "Do I understand what I have learnt", *understanding* is a criterion for the evaluation, as contrast to *memorisation* that some students believe.

3. *Regulation of one's attitude and behaviour*

Knowing how one is doing does not lead to improvement unless one is willing to make some adjustments accordingly. This is where remedies are generated and alternatives considered. Writing the plans down also helps students commit to doing them. Questions at this stage are very important as they help students look at the situation in a positive light, rather than leaving them in despair which the finding out of problems at the evaluation stage has created.

Implementing Reflective Learning Journal

Reflective learning journal is useful in cultivating lifelong learners if implemented successfully. However, as a novel idea, the relevance and value of keeping a reflective learning journal are not readily perceivable to many students such that the time and effort it requires can be justified. In this section, we shall share with you some ideas that may help you in implementing reflective learning journal successfully.

Launching the reflective journal keeping

To motivate students in engaging in reflective journal keeping, it is important to show them that the teacher cares and the department supports this continuous assignment, and that it is a worthwhile thing to do. Here are a few reminders and suggestions:

- Explain to them clearly what a *reflective* learning journal is.
- Mention the benefits of keeping such a journal.
- Give them a briefing in the administrative particulars of this exercise, e.g. length per entry, assessment criteria etc.
- If resources allow, provide students with a nice simple binder to keep their journal entries. After all, the collection of entries should be something nice to look at.

Clear instructions and continuous support are important as students might feel quite lost and confused at first, not knowing how to begin. A comprehensive guide might just be what they need.

Preparing a comprehensive guide for a reflective learning journal

The content of the guide should pretty much offers the support and guidance students need, which may vary depending on your course and subject. We suggest the following basic items:

Cover	We suggest giving the guide a cover not just to make it look nice, but to convey the objective of the exercise in a direct, visual manner. A nice cover also communicates the importance given to it by the teacher. It is also recommendable to let students design their own cover to personalise their journal.
Introduction	Briefly introduce what a reflective learning journal is and the benefits of keeping one. This part reinforces the introduction given in class as mentioned above.
General instructions	Object of reflection What learning experience to reflect on? It could be anything about learning or anything related to the course. Frequency and length The emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity, on regularity rather than frequency. One major benefit of reflective journal writing is to develop the habit of reflecting on one's process of learning, and a habit only develop through regular practice over time.

Requirement for submission Because this exercise of journal keeping lasts over a long period of time, it is useful to set some checkpoints to give the exercise a time frame and the teacher an opportunity to give feedback and/or assess the work.

Pattern of Feedback Some feedback is necessary for early entries to make sure that the students are on the right track. The level of feedback depends on the level of interaction and involvement you wish to gain through this activity. Feedback offers guidance and support to students and is important in keeping their interest in making entries. Some teachers used group discussion as a means of feedback and attained very good results (e.g. Sinclair, 2001).

Assessment The assessment of reflective journal is a struggle between giving the freedom of writing and guaranteeing the willingness to write. Some teachers resolve this by checking for completion rather than in-depth grading. This frees students the worry of being penalised for writing what comes to their minds, so that personal reflection can take place. If grade is to be given, a protocol of assessment will be a useful guide for students. Here is a sample protocol:

- (0) No entry or entry not related to the studying of the subject
- (1) Provide a descriptive account of one's study
- (2) Provide evaluative account of one's study with reference to one's learning process
- (3) Demonstrate effort in planning for improvement based on the evaluative outcome of reflection

Detail guidelines

Guiding questions can be included in the detail guidelines section to help students get a grip on making reflective entries. Guiding questions can aid or hinder reflection. See *Designing a Reflective Learning Journal* for further discussions.

Help for students

This section provides quick help to making journal entries, offering tips to matters such as content and style of writing. Uncertainties in such matters could make the task much harder thus de-motivates students.

Sample entry

In addition to clear instructions and suitable prompt questions, a sample entry would be most useful for students new to keeping reflective learning journal, as it shows them how the answers to the prompt questions may be put together to form a coherent piece of writing. It is recommendable to write your own sample entry following the instructions and guiding questions you are about to give to your students. This helps you evaluate the feasibility of the task and the comprehensibility of your instructions.

A sample of such a guide for keeping a reflective learning journal is included in the appendix of this document.

Appendix

Sample guide for students

In this section you will find a sample guide for the subject Creative and Critical Thinking. It is developed based on and includes components as described in earlier sections. Some components can be used in most cases, while some will need modification to suit the specific needs of your subject. Please note that this is only a sample. We strongly recommend you develop your own according to your needs. For details of developing such a guide please refer to the section on “Implementing reflective learning journal”.

Component	Remarks	Resources
Cover	Change the department and course title to use	
Introduction	Good for general use	
General instructions	Modify to suit your needs	Implementing Reflective Learning Journal
Detail guidelines	Need to prepare your own	- Designing a Reflective Learning Journal - The Prompt question bank
Help for students	Good for general use	
Sample entry	Need to prepare your own	

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CC2002 CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING

STUDENT



Reflective Learning Journal

What is Reflective Learning Journal?

Reflective journal is designed to help you think deeply about your learning, especially on issues such as: your progress in learning, the difficulties you encountered in the process of learning, the strategies you have taken to get around those difficulties, and your evaluation of your own performance.

What can you get from writing reflective learning journal?

For the study, writing a reflective learning journal helps you:

- bring together theory and practice,
- yield better understanding of the course material

For your development as a successful and independent learner, it helps you:

- See your strength and weakness as a learner
- Find out the methods of learning which suit your own learning style
- Notice how you can improve your learning in the future
- Gain a clearer picture of your learning progress and so in a better position to plan your learning

General Instructions

What learning experience to reflect on?

The object of reflection for this journal is your experience in learning during the week. See 'Detail guidelines' for the specifics.

Frequency and length expected

You are required to make one entry per week, each about 250 words of length. You are advised to make entry regularly rather than leaving it till before a submission date, and the quality of reflection should be the emphasis of your entries rather than worrying about the word count.

Pattern of feedback

A general feedback will be given to the entries in a submission. If there is an entry that has particular significance to you that you want feedback on, you can mark it with an asterisk on the top right corner and special attention will be given to it.

Assessment

Your reflective learning journal will contribute to 30% of your final grade for this subject. The criterion for assessment is the satisfactory completion of the task, i.e. making regular entry as required. The focus of this exercise is on reflection.

Quick reference

Your study

Once a week
250 words/entry

All /selected entries

Check for completion
30% of final grade

Requirement for submission

Your journal will be collected in three stages, on the dates specified on the adjacent column.

16-10-2002
13-11-2002
18-12-2002

Detail Guidelines

This section offers guidelines to making journal entries that are reflective and significant to you personally.

What learning experience to reflect on?

Reflect on your process of learning. Record any observations, experience, thoughts and insights that are significant to you as a learner, or even as a person.

Prompt questions for your reference:

The function of prompt questions is to stimulate your reflective thinking. You don't need to (in fact, you are not supposed to) answer every one of them in any entry.

- How what I have learned relates to my other experiences?
- What implications does it have regarding my learning?
- What difficulties have I encountered in applying my knowledge in dealing with everyday situations?
- What would be the causes for those difficulties and how could I overcome them?

- What has been discussed today in class? What does it mean to me?
- What do I find difficult in understanding? Why?
- What do I find difficult in accepting? Why?

- Could it have been otherwise?



Sample entry

Here is a sample entry to a reflective learning journal with teacher's comments on the right.

The third lecture taught about critical reading. In the part of defining critical reading, I found myself always read books passively and recklessly. When I have to read textbooks, this will happen easily. Some contents of those textbooks are quite long and boring. Just as now I am studying Microeconomics, I should read the whole chapter to get more information and concepts about this subject. But I don't think it is easy to read. The sentences are long and hard to understand. And those examples are cases in America. As I know very little about politics and economics, let alone American politics and economics, when I read this textbook, I often cannot get concise concept and write summary.

Miss recommends us to jot notes when we read: after understanding every paragraphs, write down the words in my own expression. It is more useful for use to re-read. I quite agree with her point. When I was in F.6, I retok the HKCEE in Chemistry. In that year, I jotted down all the important points into other points into another book. Then at the day I had my exam, I just read that book instead of bringing four textbooks. Although I spent much more time to write my own notes, the result proved that this method worked. However, as we now studying further, it is not same as HKCEE. The syllabus is much more detail. If I still use this method in my present study, I am sure I cannot follow the rate of progress of the syllabus. Thus, I do not use this method now. But is there any other method good for me to apply?

I also have a question: We spent almost the whole lecture to talk about argument, how to distinguish it from other statements and identify the sentences to see if they are premise or conclusion. Yet what is the use of identifying a statement as an argument? Is that what we need to know when we can judge or with other uses?

I got many difficulties and questions in writing this second reflective journal. At first, I think I know well to write journal, but later, I don't think so. Do I need to write every reflective journal referring to the previous lecture or tutor? I cannot apply them so quick and see if they work for me.

The content of the third lecture is quite hard for me to apply in my daily life. Apart from the above mentioned problem, I also have a question of what I learnt from the third session. At that tutor session, we focused on evaluating the author's tone and works. the

Well, in tertiary education, one important skill is to speed up the reading pace, but not necessarily comprehend less. It takes time. Practice makes perfect.

We need to at least have statements in order to have argument. Otherwise, there is nothing to be criticised & reasoned, i.e. it's important to tell whether a sentence is actually a

No. Anything relevant to your learning or in the course will do.

I am no rush in seeing application. Struggling with new concepts takes time.

Probably non-statements. If so, do we have to reason so harshly?

Acknowledgement: Special thanks to Wincy Lee of HKCC for providing the above journal entry.



What to write in the Reflective Learning Journal?

Reflective learning journal writing is very different from academic assignments that you have been writing. It is a piece of flexible, personal, informal piece of writing. If you are unsure about how to start, and how to write, don't just scrawl something in the journal, as writing something truly "reflective" is the most important part of the process, see if our tips can give you a lift!



"I don't know what to write!"

5 tips on what to write in a journal entry:

- Start off with whatever in your mind about your learning experience in the course
- *Don't* just throw in events in chronological order
- Describe the meaning of what you learnt in the course. Also, your reaction, feeling, opinions, views on both the learning process and the learnt material
- List the goods and bads, strengths and weaknesses you consider you demonstrate in the course of your learning
- Make advice for yourself and make plan for your learning in the near future



"Now I know what to put in the entry, but how should I write it?"

5 tips on how to write a journal entry:

- Write in first person, as if you are writing a letter to a friend
- There is **no** right or wrong answer for a journal entry. Therefore, feel free to express your ideas, opinion, and thoughts
- Don't hesitate to share your personal experience if that helps to illustrate your point
- Don't limit yourself to words – diagrams and pictures are ok too
- Don't be too intimidated by English rules. It's okay to make minor grammatical mistakes if that does not interfere the transmission of ideas. So don't put too much thoughts about how to write good English, instead spend more effort on what to write