

Guide for Reflective Practice

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Overview

Reflective practice is a common way of encouraging students to learn through and from their own experiences, with the aim of gaining new insights into themselves and their practice. Each model of reflection shares a common motive that aims to unpick the experience in order to provide clarity around the links between the 'doing' and the 'thinking', practice and theory. The process of reflection aims to make students more aware of their professional knowledge and action by 'challenging assumptions of everyday practice and critically evaluating practitioners' own responses to practice situations' (Finlay, 2008).

There are a variety of benefits for including reflective practice:

- helps build confidence in students practice and performance
- assigns responsibility and agency to students for their learning journey
- encourages innovation and experimentation as students adapt and integrate their learning into practice
- students increase their engagement in their study as they see tangible benefits that directly relate to their experience.

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle was developed to give structure to learning from experiences. It offers a framework for examining experiences, and its cyclical nature lends itself particularly well to repeated experiences, allowing students to learn and plan from successes and failures. It covers 6 stages:

1. **Description** - an outline and factual account of the experience.
2. **Feelings** - personal thoughts about the experience and how they may have impacted the experience.
3. **Evaluation** - discuss how the experience was, both good and bad. Discuss what contributed to the experience, positively and negatively.
4. **Analysis** - try and make sense of the situation. What might have helped or hindered the experience? What meaning can you extract from it?
5. **Conclusion** - summarise your learning and changes to your actions. What have you learned and what you could have done differently?
6. **Action plan** - what would you do in a similar situation in the future, or what changes you would make.

There are [a range of other models](#) of reflective practice but they follow a similar cyclical form of experience, evaluation, analysis and change.

Considerations

You will need to clearly communicate the value of reflective practice to students as students often come with predetermined views on what it means. Many don't see the academic or professional value so you should demonstrate to students the positive aspects of reflection and why it is valuable to their learning and professional practice. The word itself has certain connotations and you may find students prefer a different word for the reflective process, like 'debrief' or 'self evaluation'.

Reflection is a learnt skill that needs to be developed over time and may be an entirely new experience for many students. Introducing reflection into a course will require scaffolding to provide students with the correct level of structure and direction to ensure they get the most out of the process. Provide students with suggested questions that focus students on specific areas of their study and experience.

If you're embedding reflection in your course you need to ensure that students are engaging with their existing body of knowledge, experience and practice, rather than their thoughts and feelings about the content of the course. Asking students to relate theory to practice, what they think would work or not, is a much better way to engage them.

Use reflection not as an endpoint in the course, but throughout the course to help students personalise and shape their learning. Simply reflecting on past events does little to embed the cyclical nature of reflection where it has the most power - to affect change in students behaviour and practice.

Mapping out change can often be a difficult task for students and requires a lot of guidance. Asking them when and where change occurred can be incredibly difficult as there may not be a clear turning point, rather their journey is an arc they moved through. If you're interested in mapping students change, focus on *what* the change was and *why* it occurred.

Choosing how to implement reflective practice can be a challenge. Adding it as an activity within a course may result in students ignoring it, but aligning it to an assessment can be a challenge due to its subjective nature. The Reflection Toolkit is an incredibly useful resource and has a variety of [modes of reflecting](#) as well as strategies for [assessing it](#).

Quality Criteria

The value of the reflection is clearly communicated to the student and aligns to the course learning outcomes.

The reflective practice engages the students' lived experience and draws upon their existing knowledge. It also engages with the course content and provides a space for them to discuss this within their lived experience and professional practice.

Example

Reflections require structure and a simple way to do this is to provide students with questions to prompt specific responses. This approach allows you to steer the student towards the intended learning outcomes of the task. These questions should be tailored to the course, discipline and learning outcome. This [question list](#) (Rees, 2006) provides a large variety of grouped questions across a range of skills and areas to elicit a reflective response and provide a useful basis to develop your own tailored questions for students.

Writing Structure Example

The following provides a basic structure for a writing reflective assessment.

1. Introduction
 - Identifies and introduces your experience or learning
 - Highlights why it was important
 - Outline key themes that will appear in the reflection
2. Main body
 - Explore experience
 - Analyse and synthesise
3. Conclusion
 - Restate or state your learning
 - Plan for the future
 - Answer the question or prompt if applicable

Rubric Example

Criteria	Reflective Practitioner 3 marks	Aware Practitioner 2 marks	Reflective Novice 1 mark	Unacceptable 0 marks
Clarity	The language is clear and expressive. The reader can create a mental picture of the situation being described. Abstract concepts are explained accurately. Explanation of concepts	Minor, infrequent lapses in clarity and accuracy.	There are frequent lapses in clarity and accuracy.	Language is unclear and confusing throughout. Concepts are either not discussed or are presented inaccurately.

	makes sense to an uninformed reader.			
Relevance	The learning experience being reflected upon is relevant and meaningful to student and course learning goals.	The learning experience being reflected upon is relevant and meaningful to student and course learning goals.	An attempt is made to demonstrate relevance, but the relevance is unclear to the reader.	Most of the reflection is irrelevant to student and/or course learning goals.
Analysis	The reflection moves beyond simple description of the experience to an analysis of how the experience contributed to student understanding of self, others, and/or course concepts.	The reflection demonstrates student attempts to analyse the experience but analysis lacks depth.	An attempt is made to apply the learning experience to understanding of self, others, and/or course concepts but fails to demonstrate depth of analysis.	Reflection does not move beyond description of the learning experience(s).
Interconnections	The reflection demonstrates connections between the experience and material from other courses; past experience; and/or personal goals.	The reflection demonstrates connections between the experience and material from other courses; past experience; and/or personal goals.	There is little to no attempt to demonstrate connections between the learning experience and previous other personal and/or learning experiences.	No attempt to demonstrate connections to previous learning or experience.
Self-criticism	The reflection demonstrates the ability of the student to question their own biases, stereotypes, preconceptions, and/or	The reflection demonstrates the ability of the student to question their own biases, stereotypes, preconceptions.	There is some attempt at self-criticism, but the self-reflection fails to demonstrate a new awareness of personal	Not attempt at self-criticism.

	assumptions and define new modes of thinking as a result.		biases, etc.	
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How To

Reflective practices can be embedded into a course in a variety of ways. From set activities within the course to substantial assessment items. In most instances providing a basic structure for students is important as it guides students through the process of reflection, something they may be quite unfamiliar with.

The main modes of reflection are through:

- Written reflections
- In conversation with self
- Reflecting with others
- Creative and with media

Written reflections

Asking students to write about their experience and put their thoughts into words provides students with an opportunity to slow down and identify what they have been learning. It allows students to focus on their learning through the dedication of time and effort. Typical forms of written reflection include:

- Reflective reports/essay - usually deals with a reflective question/prompt or a topic.
- Diary/Journaling - works particularly well to record multiple entries, recurring thoughts, and development over a period of time.
- Blog posts - similar to journaling but the format and publishing on the web requires students to consider their audience. This may reduce the level of intimacy and personality that is reflected.

In conversation with self

Some students might find it easier to think reflections through in their heads or while thinking out loud. Most of us have experienced getting lost in our thoughts, but a conversation with yourself can turn into a reflection through a conscious effort. Being purposeful about *when* and what you are doing can help develop a rich reflective event. Rather than just mulling over a problem, get students to not just think about the problem itself, but with the intent to learn and generalise from it. Capturing these conversations has been a challenge but students could simply record a video or audio of themselves using their smartphone to complete this kind of task.

Students might find it useful to capture audio/video using a smartphone of their initial thoughts and feelings about an experience immediately after. Then go back and revisit their initial response to the situation/experience by listening to and/or watching and transcribing their recordings a few days later. This can assist students with the reflection process, helping them to accurately consider their initial response and comment on how and why their thoughts and/or feelings may have changed over time. Voice to text apps such as the [Otter app](#) can assist students with this process.

Reflecting with others

Much of the reflection literature highlights the value of reflecting in conversation with other people. Getting others to ask each other questions and probe their answers provides students with a different perspective on their learning, asking questions they may never have thought to ask themselves. Students can also gain multiple perspectives by reflecting on the same events but drawing on their lived experience. This can open students up to diverse social and cultural viewpoints that can add depth to their learning experience. These reflections could be conducted and recorded in a variety of ways:

- Meetings could be conducted in Zoom and recorded. These may be 1-on-1 or in groups and take place between students, students and mentors or students and supervisor/manager.
- Conversations could take place as posts on a forum so that students could keep their conversation asynchronous, responding to each other when they are available and event throughout a whole teaching period.
- Students could message each other and submit a document of the message chain. This could be in a collaborative document (Google Doc or similar) where students respond to each other over time and a conversation develops. Students take turns asking each other questions and responding to each other.

Creative and other media

In some cases students may benefit from moving beyond text and the written word in order to reflect effectively. Students may be able to more effectively reflect through a creative pursuit and focus their energy on expressing themselves creatively through poetry, video, song, painting and storytelling. In many cases this may be an unconventional approach but depending on the discipline and the course, it could provide students with a highly engaging way of communicating their learning. In many cases it may not be a matter of just submitting the creative pieces, but also providing a written explainer that accompanies the work and provides key references for the marker.

References

This guide has made extensive use of the [The Reflection Toolkit](#) developed by The University of Edinburgh.

Finlay, L. (2008). *Reflecting on 'Reflective practice'*, [PBPL paper](#).

Gibbs G (1988). *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford.