

Developing Reflective Practice

Introduction

The UK Government has had *Lifelong Learning* as a core, educational theme for a number of years. One of the foundation stones for lifelong learning is the ability to be able to self evaluate and update one's own skills and knowledge. The abilities to learn through experience and to become increasingly self-aware and self-critical are therefore crucial skills for students to develop. Global terms that seek to capture these attributes are those of reflection and reflective practice. The importance of reflection has been particularly noted in professional development and in undergraduate programmes that are closely affiliated with vocational and professional careers, such as nursing and engineering.

Schön (1983) suggested that the capacity to reflect on action, so as to engage in a process of continuous learning, was one of the defining characteristics of professional practice.

David Kolb (2000) has developed and published extensively on an experiential model of education that emphasises the importance of reflection to the learning process, and this model is widely used in CPD and teacher training in Higher Education today. Kolb's Learning cycle proposes that learners plan for and have concrete experiences that they reflect on and derive meaning from. They do this by making connections and contextualising the experience within their existing knowledge framework. Learning from and through experience is therefore at the heart of reflective practice.

Teachers in UK higher education therefore, seek to provide opportunities for students to develop the skills of reflection, self-critique and future action planning. There are a range of teaching and learning approaches and curriculum designs that require and emphasise reflection:

Personal and development planning (PDP)

In the UK school children are required to keep *Records of Achievement* which include academic successes and sporting, social and community achievements in order to promote and support a rounded and integrated development. This ideology persists into higher education and students are encouraged to set their own personal and professional development goals that are integrated with their academic studies. Personal Development Planning (PDP) requires students to self assess and review and reflect upon their own learning, skills and goals in order to devise plans to help them learn at university. Sometimes PDP is integrated with the personal tutoring system, whilst in other universities it may be associated with specific study skills modules or managed by the careers services. To find out more about PDP check out [the Higher Education Academy web pages](#) and see the briefing sheet on *Pastoral or Personal Tutorials*.

Learning diaries, logs, blogs and portfolios: tools to document reflective practice

The use of written diaries and logs, to monitor and support students undertaking projects, placements, fieldwork etc., is now common practice. These frequently include a semi-structured narrative or commentary on the learning experience with reflective comments and observations included. Some teachers may provide a set format for the reflection

whilst others use a set of questions that prompt students to consider their skills development and encourage reflection at key stages of a piece of work. Others are more *free form* and students diarise their own experiences in ways that they find useful. A distinctive feature of portfolios is that the reflections are supported by selected evidence, in the form of materials and examples that illustrate key learning points.

Originally logs and diaries were paper based but increasingly electronic formats are being employed. Some teachers are experimenting with blogging software that allows students to share their ideas and thoughts more widely and to discuss their self-reflections virtually. To learn more about blogs, web logs and electronic learning logs check out [the University of Leeds Staff Development pages](#).

For tutors to grade learning logs summatively is difficult (and time consuming), so many are simply judged on a pass/fail basis or are considered to be a required element of studying the module or course and do not carry marks or credits. Another approach is to ask student to self- and peer-assess their own learning journals formatively, as learning how to be self reflective and self critical is the real point of the exercise. As learning from what you have done and experienced is central to reflective practice, it is clear that the giving and receiving of feedback is very important to the likely success of this process.

Getting the views of others and synthesising these with one's own thoughts and feelings can enrich reflection.

Making really good use of feedback

Each year graduating students are surveyed to find out how they rate their learning experience in higher education. This nation-wide exercise, the *National Student Survey* (NSS) has highlighted a common concern – students want more and better quality feedback on their work. Many academics are addressing this in their own modules and working to improve the quantity and quality of feedback that they provide. However, there is also a belief that many students do not make full use of the feedback that they already receive. Teachers frequently comment that their students look at the grade or mark that they have been awarded but pay little attention to the written feedback comments also given. Feedback is intended to help the student self reflect and so improve their work in the future, but sometimes students lack the awareness and skills to do this effectively.

Ways in which you can prompt students to make better use of the feedback that they receive, include:

- Require students to self-assess work before it is handed in, and then compare their assessment with yours.
- Use a *submission cover sheet* in which students are asked to recall the feedback they received in previous assignments and note how they have applied it in the work they are now handing in.
- Allocate time in class to go through feedback and provide a set of structured questions that directs students to systematically consider the guidance provided and plan for future work.
- Review all coursework comments and grades for a student in a personal tutorial so that themes and patterns can be detected across several pieces of work and a more holistic assessment can be made of the student's strengths and weaknesses.

Hints, tips and suggestions

Supporting self-assessment is usually a case of providing motivation (e.g. making it a course requirement) and a structure (prompt questions and a timeframe). Students need to be convinced of the value of reflection and for many this is partially driven by thoughts of future career choices and thinking about how they can best present themselves in CVs

and at interviews.

Educators sometimes refer to the need for students to develop their meta-cognitive skills when reflecting. This is their ability to 'think about thinking' – in other words to be aware of how they think and learn, to be able to stand back from what they are doing to get the 'big picture' or overview. In this way learners can see trends and appreciate how they plan or think about tasks (Livingston, 1997). This can suggest ways in which teachers can prompt students to use their meta-cognition is reviewing their experiences – perhaps asking learners about how they are learning or tackling learning tasks.

For further information

Boud, D. and Falchikov, N., 2007. Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education: Learning for the longer term. Routledge. This is an edited collection, with useful chapters on Feedback by Dai Hounsell (chapter 8) and Conceptions of self assessment by Kelvin Tan (chapter 9).

Kolb, D. A.; Boyatzis, R.E. and Mainemelis, C. (2000) Experiential Learning Theory: Previous research and new directions, In Sternberg, R. J. and Zhang, L. F. (Eds.), Perspectives on cognitive, learning, and thinking styles. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Livingston, J. (1997) [Metacognition: An Overview](#). State University of New York at Buffalo.

Schön (1983) The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action, Basic Books: New York

Schön D (1987) Educating the Reflective Practitioner. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

[Reflective Practice, SWCETT](#). A set of web-pages that provide discussion, theoretical underpinnings, educational exercises and tasks together with video material that explore reflective practice.

<http://www.internationalstaff.ac.uk>