

Assessing Reflection

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Reflective practice is a habit of master learners. Those who do not critique their own performances regularly, evaluating and re-evaluating how their daily actions are shaped by their values, preferences, and perspectives will never be aware of their own strengths (so as to capitalize on these), weaknesses (so as to improve), or passions (so as to sustain themselves). Reflection gives meaning to experience; it turns experience into practice, links past and present experiences, and prepares the individual for future practice. It is the “hallmark of professional behavior.”¹ Teachers, then, should strive to inculcate in their students the habits of reflective practice. Reflective practice is especially important in helping students to learn from experience and so can be found regularly in courses with service learning or clinical components. Reflective practice is an essential feature of the formation of professional identity.

Reflection as a tool for self-assessment is an integral part of the learning process. It is the process of critically reviewing the quality of one’s performance in an activity. Reflection can also serve as a tool for learning from observation, when a student places themselves in the shoes of the person he or she is observing and asks, “Why did he do that?” or “How would I do this the same or differently?”

How can educators assess and improve their students’ skills of reflection and self-assessment?

First, we can provide significant learning experiences: readings, observations, and experiences that are engaging, relevant, and challenge the students. As our clinical colleagues have taught us, personal written reflection can be very effective if the students are reflecting on genuine experience and observations, rather than reflection that is merely an academic exercise. (I know my reflection assignment is not very effective when students ask “Do you want us to use footnotes?”). Expecting students to learn from reflection if the underlying experience is rote or routine or thin is like adding yeast to sand and expecting that one can make bread. It will simply fall flat.

Second, we can lead students to their reflection. Many students may be unfamiliar with reflection, confusing “reflection” with “reporting” and missing the critical step of self assessment that is at the core of reflection. Where students are asked to reflect in writing, their focus may be simply on the writing, rather than the content. For students to improve their reflective abilities,

¹ Margaret M. Plack, Maryanne Driscoll, et. al., *A Method for Assessing Reflective Journal Writing*, 34:4 J. ALLIED HEALTH 199, 200 (2005)(quoting Shepard KF, Jensen GM (eds): *Handbook of Teaching for Physical Therapists*. Boston, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann; 1997).

they must know what this skills requires and the reasons for engaging in the practice. Prompts can be very important tools to use in guiding student reflection. Prompts can:

- ask students to describe their experience/action;
- evaluate their actions (or the actions of others) against agreed-upon standards
- compare their choices (or the choices of those they are observing) to alternatives approaches
- identify the motivations, values, or assumptions that drove their own action or the action of others;
- place their choices in context of some larger theory or pattern;
- conceive how their judgment in the future might be affected by this experience and reflection.

Third, we can engage students in the product of their reflection. That engagement can be through oral discussion and dialogue, but there are many reasons to consider asking students to reflect in writing. The formality of written reflections can encourage students to spend more time and be more precise in articulating their reflections. Written reflections produce artifacts of the student's learning that both student and teacher can revisit at a later time to look for signs of growth. If we wanted to see patterns in students' abilities to get some depth on certain topics or develop greater facility in particular reflection skills, we will need to provide numerous opportunities for reflection on similar experiences or in similar formats.

Faculty assessment of the products of student reflection presents a number of challenges. In order to use written reflections as tools for measurable assessment, faculty must decide what the criteria are by which they will assess reflection and the levels of mastery of that skill. Developing a rubric to assess reflection can help crystalize these agreements.

One of the most common concerns in assessment of reflection is the fact that the product of the reflection is not something one can predict or which might be measured against some objective standard. However, if it is the skill of reflection that is the outcome being targeted, the assessment should focus on that skill, rather than the conclusions drawn from its application. With explicit criteria for evidence of a reflective process, reflections from very different experiences with very different conclusions can be compared and evaluated.

A second concern is whether assessment will be used as a basis for the course grade. Some research indicates that students will be cautious and guarded when they know they will be judged on their reflections; while other research indicates that graded reflections can provide important

incentives for attention to the task.² Providing students opportunities for formative assessment in reflection can help to alleviate some of these tensions.

The following rubric³ provides examples of some of the criteria one might use in assessing reflective writing, depending on the conditions one sets for the reflection:

	UNDEVELOPED	DEVELOPING	SKILLED
DESCRIBING EXPERIENCE Student provides a description of the experience, observation, activity, reading, etc. upon which he or she is reflecting	Unclear and vague	Clear but general	Clear and focused on the specific aspects that challenge the student
DESCRIBING RESPONSE Student provides a description of their intellectual and emotional response to the experience	Unclear and vague	Some response but limited to one domain (e.g., only emotional, intellectual) or to reflection only, without indication of conscious contemporaneous reflection.	Clear and focused description of the feelings, thoughts, and questions raised by the student at the time of the experience and upon reflection.
GENERAL REFLECTION Evidence that the student has questioned or evaluated their prior perceptions, actions, or beliefs	Minimal reflection – No personal reflection or limited to description of general opinions and behaviors without reflection on underlying assumptions, habits, or values driving those opinions or behaviors.	Reflection – Making connection between student’s personal assumptions, habits, or values and the opinions or behaviors upon which the student is reflecting.	Critical reflection – Critical evaluation (questioning, examining more closely) student’s personal assumptions, habits, or values and their connection to the opinions or behaviors upon which the student is reflecting in light of other perspectives.
DIRECTED TOPIC REFLECTION	Minimal reflection – No personal reflection or limited	Reflection – Making connection between student’s	Critical reflection – Critical evaluation (questioning,

² Sue Schutz, Assessing and Evaluating Reflection, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN NURSING 59-60 (Chris Bulman and Sue Schutz, ed. 4th ed. 2008).

³ Thanks to Margaret Reuter, Visiting Professor, Indiana University- Maurer School of Law for her collaboration in building this rubric.

Evidence that the student has questioned or evaluated their prior perceptions, actions, or beliefs about (Collaboration, Professionalism, Autonomy, etc.)	to description of general opinions and behaviors without reflection on underlying assumptions, habits, or values driving those opinions or behaviors.	personal assumptions, habits, or values and the opinions or behaviors upon which the student is reflecting.	examining more closely) student's personal assumptions, habits, or values and their connection to the opinions or behaviors upon which the student is reflecting in light of other perspectives.
USING INSIGHTS Student's reflection leads to plans for future action	Students reflection is entirely backward looking, with no indication of how the student will use the insights and skills gained.	Student has generalized statements regarding how the reflection will direct future actions or beliefs	Student provides concrete plans for further action or reflection for a specific purpose such as developing skills, improving self-understanding, or refining belief systems
CONNECTIONS TO READING/RESEARCH Student uses coursework, reading, or independent research to advance reflection as appropriate.	Does not include any reference to outside reading or research to inform reflection	Reflection refers to past readings or research in a descriptive or citation fashion with little indication of motivation to use reading or research to inform reflection	Connects reflection to past readings and research and indicates efforts to re-read or conduct additional research to learn more about aspects of the experience upon which reflection occurs. Describes specific insights or extensions of reflection gained from that reading and research.
CONNECTIONS TO PEOPLE Student engages instructors, mentors, colleagues, and others in conversations about reflection as appropriate.	Demonstrates no effort to engage others in reflecting on the experience or insights.	Describes some conversations or interviews regarding the experience or reflection but only in an incidental fashion, rather than as an effort to test ideas or gain insights	Demonstrates meaningful conversations with others to test ideas and gain insights on the experience and reflection.

<p>WRITING QUALITY Quality of writing indicates careful attention to reflective practice by providing clear topic, using concrete and precise language, organizing thoughts for the reader, and proofreading essay for grammar, punctuation, and spelling</p>	<p>Unfocused, unorganized, vague, and sloppy</p>	<p>Some focus and organization. Language has some precision. Essay was proofread</p>	<p>Topic(s) are clear and specific, descriptions use concrete and precise language and insights are precise and clear, Organization is apparent and effective. Essay has been proofread for grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.</p>
<p>Format and timing</p>	<p>Fails to meet minimum page requirements Submitted late</p>	<p>Barely meets the 15 page minimum requirement.</p>	<p>Total page count over 20.</p>

In addition to providing students with the rubric and my assessment of their effort, I also try to provide individual feedback on each assignment, even if it is simply “Thank you for your reflection “with some acknowledgement of the content, such as “you were not alone in concluding that _____” or “I agree that _____” If questions or reflection appear shallow or insincere, I primarily ask additional questions to prompt more thoughtful responses in future reflection.