

Resources for Reflective Learning

This is a selection of pages from Moon, J (2004)
A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning , Routledge Falmer, London. You
are welcome to use this material freely, but it would be good if you referenced it.....
There is more detail on the exercises in the book, but some are self evident

Resource 2: Reflective Writing - some initial guidance for students (handout)

By Jenny Moon

Introduction – reflection and reflective writing

Reflection lies somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting. Reflective writing is the expression on paper/screen of some of the mental processes of reflection. Other forms of expressing reflection are in speech, in film, in graphic portrayal, music etc. The expression of reflection is not, however, a direct mirror of what happens in the head. It is a representation of that process within the chosen medium - and reflection represented in writing, for example, will be different to that encompassed in a drawing. In other words, in making a representation of reflection, we shape and model the content of our reflection according to many influences. Factors that could shape your reflection into reflective writing might include:

- the reason why you are writing reflectively (personal reasons – e.g. in a diary or for academic purposes etc)
- whether others are going to see what you have written and who they are (e.g. no-one else; a tutor who will mark it; a tutor who will not mark it, friends etc.);
- your emotional state at the time of writing, and emotional reaction to what you are writing (e.g. - a disturbing event that you do not want to think about or something you did well and want to enjoy in the rethinking process);
- related to the above, how safe you feel about the material and anyone seeing it;
- what you know about reflective writing and how able you are to engage in it (see below)

– and so on. It is also worth noting that you will learn not only from the ‘in the head’ reflection but from the process of representing the reflection itself. Also, you will learn different things according to the manner in which you represent your reflection. For example, what you would learn from drawing a picture to represent reflections will differ from what you will

learn in writing about the same content. It is a part of the process of writing reflectively to be as aware as possible of the influences that are shaping the writing that you actually do.

What is reflective writing?

We will start from what reflective writing is not. It is not:

- conveyance of information, instruction or argument in a report, essay or 'recipe';
- straight-forward description, though there may be descriptive elements;
- a straight-forward decision eg about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad etc.
- simple problem solving like recalling how to get to the nearest station.

In the context of your higher education programme, reflective writing will usually have a purpose (e.g. you will be writing reflectively about something that you have to do or have done). It will usually involve the sorting out of bits of knowledge, ideas, feelings, awareness of how you are behaving and so on. It could be seen as a melting pot into which you put a number of thoughts, feelings, other forms of awareness, and perhaps new information. In the process of sorting it out in your head, and representing the sortings out on paper, you may either recognise that you have learnt something new or that you need to reflect more with, perhaps further input. Your reflections need to come to some sort of end point, even if that is a statement of what you need to consider next.

It is also worth recognising that reflective writing may be a means of becoming clearer about something. For example, you might use reflective writing to consider the kind of career direction that you might take. Into the 'melting pot' you might then 'put' ideas, information, feelings, other people's perspectives and advice. A metaphor for reflection or its expression in reflective writing in this context is 'cognitive housekeeping' to imply its nature as a sorting out, clarifying process.

From what has been said above, it will be obvious that reflection is not a straight-forward and 'tidy' process itself. When you have to represent the process for someone else to read, you will inevitably tidy it up – but if a tutor is expecting reflective writing, s/he will not be looking for a dry 'single-track' account, or just a conclusion. It is also all right to use the first person – 'I' - in reflective writing.

Let us assume that you are reflecting on a presentation that you have just done in class. We said, above, that reflective writing is not a 'straight-forward' description. You will probably have to describe what you are about to reflect on and perhaps relate it to the purpose for which you are reflecting. But reflection is more than that. You might want to evaluate your performance in the presentation, for example. This may be represented by you questioning yourself, perhaps challenging yourself. You may consider your reactions, and even the manner in which you have initially viewed the situation and written about it. Your writing may recognise that others may have different views of the same event. So with regard to the presentation, you might think about the performances of others – and so on.

Some subject matter for reflective writing

Reflective writing may apply to anything that is relatively complex. You might reflect on:

- how to go about your dissertation topic;
- how well you wrote an assignment;
- experiences gained in your part time work;
- what your essay title means and how to go about writing it;
- how to present some project work;
- how you want to behave differently in some context;
- the way in which your non-work activities relate to the programme that you are on;
- the quality of a relationship with someone (to do with your programme or home or family etc);
- how well you got on in your programme last semester;
- your process in solving a difficult problem (e.g. in academic work);
- what you need to do to improve your study processes – and anything and everything....

You will often find there to be unexpected rewards in working in this manner. You will find out things that you had not considered, you even find that your academic writing becomes more fluent; you may find that you can solve problems more easily when you have reflected on your processing of similar problems.

The quality of reflective writing

It is worth thinking of the quality of reflective writing as being on a continuum from rather superficial writings that are largely descriptive, to much deeper writings in which the questioning is more profound. Neither is necessarily right or wrong – they are just different. Reflective writing will need be ‘pitched’ according to the purpose for which the task is done. Those who are learning to become counsellors and need to question their motives for the way they work will require to take a much more profound approach, for example, than most others in higher education programmes. The challenge is at least to ‘go beyond’ descriptive writing. The questions below help to give a picture of the difference between descriptive and more profound reflection.

A final note

‘Reflection’ is a word in every-day language but that in some contexts it is a subject of academic study, with many books and papers devoted to it. The material in this paper is derived from three books Moon, J (1999, 1999a and 2003), which provide an introduction to the literature for those who are interested in taking this further.

Resource 9: A Framework for Reflective Writing

Descriptive Writing

This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection. It may tell a story but from one point of view at a time and generally one point at a time is made. Ideas tend to be linked by the sequence of the account / story rather than by meaning. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.

There may be references to emotional reactions but they are not explored and not related to behaviour.

The account may relate to ideas or external information, but these are not considered or questioned and the possible impact on behaviour or the meaning of events is not mentioned.

There is little attempt to focus on particular issues. Most points are made with similar weight.

The writing could hardly be deemed to be reflective at all. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that would serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though a good description that precedes reflective accounts will tend to be more focused and to signal points and issues for further reflection.

Descriptive account with some reflection

This is a descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection.

The basic account is descriptive in the manner of description above. There is little addition of ideas from outside the event, reference to alternative viewpoints or attitudes to others, comment and so on. However, the account is more than just a story. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question or there are questions to be asked and answered. Points on which reflection could occur are signalled.

There is recognition of the worth of further exploring but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

The questioning does begin to suggest a ‘standing back from the event’ in (usually) isolated areas of the account.

The account may mention emotional reactions, or be influenced by emotion. Any influence may be noted, and possibly questioned.

There is a sense of recognition this is an incident from which learning can be gained, – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

Reflective writing (1)

There is description but it is focused with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. There may be a sense that the material is being mulled around. It is no longer a straight-forward account of an event, but it is definitely reflective.

There is evidence of external ideas or information and where this occurs, the material is subjected to reflection.

The account shows some analysis and there is recognition of the worth of exploring motives or reasons for behaviour

Where relevant, there is willingness to be critical of the action of self or others. There is likely to be some self questioning and willingness also to recognise the overall effect of the event on self. In other words, there is some 'standing back' from the event.

There is recognition of any emotional content, a questioning of its role and influence and an attempt to consider its significance in shaping the views presented.

There may be recognition that things might look different from other perspectives, that views can change with time or the emotional state. The existence of several alternative points of view may be acknowledged but not analysed.

In other words, in a relatively limited way the account may recognise that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time but it does not deal with this in a way that links it effectively to issues about the quality of personal judgement.

Reflective writing (2)

Description now only serves the process of reflection, covering the issues for reflection and noting their context. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and internal dialogue.

The account shows deep reflection, and it incorporates a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change.

A metacognitive stance is taken (i.e. critical awareness of one's own processes of mental functioning – including reflection).

The account probably recognises that events exist in a historical or social context that may be influential on a person's reaction to them. In other words, multiple perspectives are noted.

Self questioning is evident (an 'internal dialogue' is set up at times) deliberating between different views of personal behaviour and that of others).

The view and motives of others are taken into account and considered against those of the writer.

There is recognition of the role of emotion in shaping the ideas and recognition of the manner in which different emotional influences can frame the account in different ways.

There is recognition that prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of current behaviour.

There is observation that there is learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted.

There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing.

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