Academic Reflection

Using Reflective Assignments to Improve Student Learning

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Reflection as High Order Thinking

• Academic reflection, if properly constructed, can lead students to high level abstract thinking, as well as aid in comprehension and absorption of classroom learning.
• Fieldwork, internships, and service learning rely upon the reflective process as the vehicle for synthesizing theory and experience.
• Seminar and lecture courses rely upon the reflective process as the vehicle for understanding and absorption—for learning that lasts.
Common Myths about Reflective Assignments

• too subjective
• not intellectually rigorous
• time consuming to grade
• limited to journals and open discussion
• unstructured
Myth-busting!

Academic Reflection:
• invites students to think deeply about community-based learning.
• requires both creative and critical thinking skills to prepare for, succeed in, and learn from experience.
• creates stronger and more engaged thinkers through well-structured assignments.
• With good planning, should be student-centered and to some degree can be student-monitored.
Academic Reflection is...Continuous...Challenging...Connected

• Happens before, during, and after the learning experience to prepare students and reinforce discipline connections
• Supports students as they synthesize and apply concepts
• Encourages understanding of implications of concepts and theories
REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Reflection can move from experience to question or question to experience
What? (Reporting what happened, objectively):

What happened? What did you observe? What issue is being addressed or population is being served? What were the results of the project? What events or “critical incidents” occurred? What was of particular notice? How did you feel about that? Let’s hear from someone who had a different reaction?
**So What?** *(What did you learn? What difference did your involvement make?)*:

**Participant:** New skill or clarified interests? Surprises? What struck you about that? How was that significant? What impacts the way you view the situation/experience? *(What lens are you viewing from?)* What do the critical incidents mean to you? How did you respond to them? *

**The Recipient:** Did the “service” empower the recipient to become more self sufficient? What did you learn about the people/community? What might impact the recipient’s views or experience of the project?

**The Community:** What are some of the pressing needs/issues in the community? How does this project address those needs? How, specifically, has the community benefited? What is the least impact you can imagine for the project? With unlimited creativity, what is the most impact on the community that you can imagine?
Now What? (How will they think or act in the future as a result of this experience? Students consider broader implications of the experience and apply learning. Be aware to strike a balance between realistic, reachable goals and openness to spontaneity and change.):

- What seem to be the root causes of the issue/problem addressed?
- What kinds of activities are currently taking place in the community related to this project?
- What contributes to the success of projects like this?
- What hinders success?
- What learning occurred for you in this experience? How can you apply this learning?
- What would you like to learn more about, related to this project or issue?
- What follow-up is needed to address any challenges or difficulties?
- What information can you share with your peers or community volunteers?
- If you were in charge of the project, what would you do to improve it?
- If you could do the project again, what would you do differently?
JOURNALS ENABLE STUDENTS TO...

• Deconstruct challenges
• Explore breakthroughs in thinking
• Analyze problems
• Propose solutions
• Raise questions
Inquiry-driven Reflection: moves from question to experience

• Articulate for students questions important to discipline-learning
• In journals, students respond to the questions by making connections with experience
• Have students compare/contrast how the question is manifested in each situation
• Students then reflect on key discipline issues, discuss contradictions, variables, etc.
Structured Journals

**Highlighted Journal**
Before students submit the reflective journal, they reread personal entries and, using a highlighter, mark sections of the journal that directly relate to concepts discussed in the text or in class. This makes it easier for the instructor to identify how the student is reflecting on his or her experience in light of course content.

**Key Phrase Journal**
In this type of journal, students must integrate terms and key phrases within their journal entries. The instructor can provide a list of terms at the beginning of the semester or for a certain portion of the text. Students can also create their own list of key phrases to include. Journal entries are written within the framework of the course content and become an observation of how course content is evident in the experience.
Double-entry Journal

• describe their thoughts and reactions to the experience on the left page
• key issues from class discussions or readings on the right
• draw arrows indicating relationships between experiences and course content.
• can lead to a more formal reflection paper
• double-sided format and arrows make faster reading for instructors
Critical Incident Journal—Moves from experience to question

Students analyze a particular event that occurred during the week. By answering one of the following sets of prompts, students are asked to consider their thoughts and reactions and articulate the action they plan to take in the future:

Describe a significant event that occurred as a part of the learning experience. Why was this significant to you? What underlying issues or questions (societal, discipline related) surfaced as a result of this experience? How has this incident influenced your perspective or understanding?

Another set of questions for a critical incident journal includes the following prompts:

Describe an incident or situation that created a dilemma for you in terms of what to say or do. What is the first thing you thought of to say or do? List three other actions you might have taken. Which of the above seems best to you now and why do you think this is the best response?
THE TRIPLE-ENTRY JOURNAL

Section 1: Describe a situation or critical event at the service site.

Section 2: Connect course material to the described situation.

Section 3: How does the combination of course material and service experience aid to your understanding or thinking about this incident?

ORID model:

Objective (What did I do, see hear, experience?)

Relational (What do I think about these experiences/observations?)

Informational (What do I know, based on course material, that can help me understand these experiences or contextualize them?)

Decisional (What public policy practices or social theory would I suggest to help resolve this community issue?)
Reflective Assignments that Support Discipline Connections
Directed readings—
• outside of the traditional course textbooks can provide a broader or local context of Social responsibility and civic literacy
• can challenge students to apply current knowledge within discipline to current social needs and events.
• Can be student-generated through research

Directed Writings—
• prompt students to reflect on experiences within the framework of course content.
• can be student-generated through textbooks or materials
• allow students to analyze course content critically and apply it to current problems and issues

Current Events—
• students keep a folder of newspaper clippings or notes from the daily news linked to discipline or community
• clippings used as catalysts for class discussions, reflective papers, and journals
Values Continuum--
• name each corner of the classroom as follows: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree; name the middle of the room as Neutral
• students go to the place for which they most identify based on readings, discipline-related questions, values statements, etc.
• allow time to discuss reasons for standing where they are
• have each group report back
• allow "switching" if they have changed their minds
• continue discussion, and repeat the process
• easily adapted for Blackboard discussion groups

Truth Is Stranger than Fiction
(moving from experience to question)
• best used toward the middle and end of a course
• students divided into groups of no more than three
• students write the most unusual story that happened to them during their learning experience and share it with their small group or online discussion group
• explore impact of experience and expectation
SOURCES

• www.campuscompact.org/disciplines/reflection/structuring
