

Assessing Reflective Learning: precepts, percepts and practices

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Reflection and Learning

R.D. Laing, the distinguished psychiatrist, said that we are 'acting parts in a play we have never read and never seen', (Laing 1971). This allusion to the influence that the unconscious has in shaping our thought and action, provides those in higher education with a reminder that, until we learn to reflect and liberate our minds, we shall be destined to repeat past mistakes. Subscribing to such a post-Freudian interpretation, it follows that by deepening our understanding of unconscious and conscious processes, insight and genuine change become possible.

Within higher education, reflective learning methodologies are becoming an increasingly essential tool for the review and evaluation of past experience since reflective learning is a practice that can be delivered both within a subject-specific or a discrete context. Indeed, reflective learning is one of the key mechanisms by which both pedagogic development in the academy and the skills of lifelong learning can be attained.

Reflection versus Practicum

Of course it is right to question the elevation of reflection over, for example, manual skills in education. However such issues may be answered by identifying reflection as a bridge between both mind and body and theory and practice - an argument developed by Kolb (1984) in his experiential learning model and an opinion to which we shall return later.

The benefits of reflective practice in higher education include, for example, the development of critical faculties, identifying personal learning needs, meta-cognition, (thinking about thinking), and what Moon (2001) proposes, which is 'to allow learners to record their progression' or 'learning journey'. Similarly Moon (2001) comments on the difference between adopting a *deep* and a *surface* approach to

learning, and suggests that it is reflective practice that is the decisive factor in distinguishing the two.

Defining Reflection: Problems of Language and Meaning

There appears to be no real consensus on the meaning of 'reflection'. As a private activity, the 'workings' of reflection are largely hidden from the independent observer but that does not mean it cannot ever be known, since the interface between what is privately held, and what is publicly known and understood, is language. This however, does not solve the problem of meaning, since words are not synonymous with the experience of each actor in the process. For that reason, a critic of reflection may argue that no objective or scientific assessment or evaluation of reflection is possible. But perhaps that would be to belittle the value of reflection in our 'struggle to make sense of our past in our present' (James, 1997), and ignore the crucial distinction between reflection as *product* and reflection as *process*. Even the scientist derives theory from data predicated on subjective perception and interpretation; a reality reconstituted to fit the desired outcome. Therefore, issues of language and subjectivity are inherent in any discipline and are certainly not peculiar to reflection.

Theories of Reflection

In 1933, Dewey spoke of reflection as 'persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it' and his work dealt with persuading teachers to explore the underlying reasons for the educational decisions they were taking. Such a continual scrutiny of our underlying framework of assumptions, he argued, would ensure practitioners would never become complacent, and that they would continue to question the 'truth' as it appeared to manifest itself. Later authors such as Schön (1987), Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) and Kolb (1984) suggest and appraise other elements of reflection, which they propose to be: analysis, synthesis, evaluation and feeling, emphasising that reflection not only has a cognitive component, but also, an equally-important *affective* (feeling) component.

Viewed in isolation, Kolb has perhaps a limited and slightly counter-intuitive view of reflection. His reflective practitioner, in that model of the *experiential learning cycle*, is the only participant in the experiential learning process. It is a model that fails to take sufficient account of the social learning environment and the benefits derived from shared learning, collective reflection and feedback. It is not a means of reappraising the things we have already experienced. However, Schön (1987), assists by providing a time-based account of reflection. His *reflection-on-action* (past), and *reflection-in-action* (present) models are valuable tools for helping professionals resolve problems in their practice since it assists us in turning our tacitly-held *theory-in-use* into *explicit knowledge-in-action*. Nevertheless, Schön does not fully

consider the anticipatory, projective or future-facing role of reflection in learning. Our past experiences, and our reflections on these, clearly inform our *future expectations* and the choices we make as a consequence. It is through reflection that we devise our next steps; we do not merely audit our past and present.

Learning Objectives and Assessment Criteria

Even though the theorists may not leave us with a unified model, we may proceed on the basis that the process of reflection is beneficial since it raises consciousness and develops greater understanding of our 'self', thereby taking on an emancipating function in learning and development. But should we want (or need) to assess the extent and quality of any reflective learning that has taken place - turn an ostensibly private process into a 'measurable' pedagogic activity - we face difficulty. For example, traditional summative assessment (exams/essays) within this author's subject area, (Music and Media law), has historically allowed content/output produced by the student to be objectively assessed against predetermined criteria. That model is left wanting when employed for the purposes of assessing 'reflection'.

One of the great virtues of reflective learning is that it promotes unanticipated or unforeseen learning outcomes and must do so if it is to encourage enquiry in participants. In order to assess reflection there therefore needs to be a fundamental shift in attitude so that instead of focussing on the numerical grading of output, (or content of reflection), the activity of reflection must be examined and evidence sought of internal dialogue and questioning processes together with movement towards 'desired' change. Then, with the focus on this process driven analysis of reflection, objective assessment criteria may then be devised of the kind considered in the following sections. In support of this practice, Bourner (2004) comments that;

'the essence of the reflective learning process is...interrogating experience with searching questions...Reflective learning is not what happens to a student, it is what the student does with what has happened'.

For in the reflective process we are looking to assess what McGill and Brockbank (1998) refer to as 'evidence revealing that the learning journey and development has taken place'. We are looking for signs of reflective thinking through the implicit and/or explicit asking of relevant and deep questions.

Formulation of Reflective Learning Assessment Criteria

In the development of criteria for assessing reflective thinking skills in Music and Media Law modules at undergraduate level, the author was aided by the employment of Bloom et al's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives - a work which is particularly helpful for articulating assessment criteria.

Using this taxonomy in that way, educational objectives may be written which require the learner to demonstrate (upon completion of a learning activity) what they will:-

- Know
- Comprehend
- (be able to) Apply
- (be able to) Analyse
- (be able to) Synthesise
- (be able to) Evaluate

They are set out as progressive learning stages (where evaluation occupies the highest level) and they are useful in relation to identifying specific assessment criteria against which reflection may be measured. For example, for a learner to demonstrate 'evaluation', assessment criteria may require them to provide evidence of them having (a) reviewed an educational episode, (b) written down associated ideas and observations and (c) drawn on parallels with previous experience. At the lower end of the progression, demonstrating being able to 'know' and 'comprehend' may be equated with (a) the detailed description of a learning incident and (b) comparing it with other events.

Reflection, Emotion and Assessment Criteria

Krathwohl et al. (1964) contributed to this taxonomy (where they documented the affective domain more specifically) and the understanding that cognitive ability is hugely affected by emotional motivation, best underpins the development of assessment criteria most suited to the reflective domain. By drawing a correlation between stages of reflection and an appropriate verb to describe learning outcomes, assessment criteria can be generated. For example, the reflection stage of '*taking stock of existing knowledge and feeling*', can be pegged against the assessment criteria of (1) demonstrating awareness, perceiving, listening and accepting. Similarly at the higher end of the taxonomic scale, the '*evaluation and integration of new knowledge into existing knowledge*' can be pegged against reflection using criteria such as 'finding, forming, relating, judging, and identifying'.

Emotion is clearly a vital component of learning, and psychologists, such as Salzberger-Wittenberg (1983), contend that as learning arises in a situation in which we 'do not as yet know' or are 'as yet unable to achieve what we aim to do', all learning invariably involves uncertainty, hope and fear. Therefore in order to be a confident learner in an unknowable future, an ability to reflect on past experience and convert confusion into clarity is critical. With this in mind, perhaps Bloom's taxonomy could be expanded to take into account and assess reflective process where it is demonstrated to have solved interpersonal and emotional problems in the learning arena. Indeed, such a taxonomy could be very useful in writing learning outcomes or developing criteria against which even ethics (e.g. how to behave in

legal practice), or classroom conduct might be judged. Certainly, in this respect, within the field of legal and media education, (this author's area of teaching), Webb and Maughan's (2005) distinction between four kinds of legal reflection may be useful.

They detail:

- Reflection on skills required in performing a task, e.g. negotiating a contract, drafting a letter
- Reflection on professional conduct (ethics/client handling)
- Reflection on substantive law and procedure
- Reflection on legal theory, process and philosophy

Grading Reflection

However, Bloom's taxonomy has its limitations. Since there is no way of measuring the reflective capacity of a student at the start of their studies, it becomes more difficult to assess the progress of an individual's reflective skill over time. Nevertheless, a 'generic' grade may still be awarded for reflective work on the basis of current performance of a reflective task, e.g. a grade of *poor*, *good*, or *excellent* which although neither reliable nor rigorous, goes some way to dealing with the concerns of those who may suggest that students will only learn if they are assessed. In this way, the idea may be not to reach consensus, but as Eisner (1985) proposes in discussing the notion of connoisseurship', to grade work of this kind and assess outcomes as simply '*defensible or not against proposed criteria*'.

Assessment Methodologies

Such a discussion of learning outcomes and assessment criteria requires that we suggest methods for delivering these reflective/affective outcomes and there is a wide range of assessment regimes and specific techniques that teachers can employ to that effect. Learning journals, portfolios, personal development plans, diaries, peer feedback groups, learning contracts, learning partnerships and critical incident analyses are just a few examples. Tutors may then review the results of student reflection with a view to exploring its validity and the degree to which critical reflection has occurred and similarly, reliability can be achieved by drawing on a broad range of assessment tools across a subject discipline.

- Learning Contracts - can be particularly effective and can provide incentives to learning as they are freely negotiated between learner and tutor and may be drafted to agree the specific learning outcomes of any activity. Then, through negotiation with the teacher, the student has the chance to review, reflect, and revise their learning methods and aims.

- Learning partnerships - Boud and Knights (1996) comment on the effectiveness of learning partnerships, particularly for 'part-time students who have less opportunities to interact with their peers'. The partner undertakes to work reflectively with the learner and is a consistent point of contact on their journey.
- Learning journals may be helpful where a student wishes to work through personal/educational issues, where no immediate solution is apparent. A description of experiences and thoughts can be entered down one side of the journal (feelings/dealing with criticism/worries/frustrations/change), and on the other can be detailed *contemporaneous reflections* and planned action points. As long as any highly personal pages are removed prior to submission, there should be no problem as regards privacy or confidentiality.

By using a range of tools, a multi-dimensional and deep approach to reflection can be adopted, and this would serve to demonstrate what Hatton and Smith (1995) refer to as 'dialogic reflection', or the ability to step back from the event, leading to 'an exploration of the role of the self in outcomes'. However, as Boud and Walker (1998) candidly observe, 'there are no reflective activities which are guaranteed to lead to learning, and conversely there are no learning activities guaranteed to lead to reflection'.

Problems with assessing reflection

There is a risk that by assessing reflection one can create resistance to the very process that we are trying to foster since there is a risk that students may see reflective tasks as just another academic hurdle to overcome and, in so doing, may miss out on an important opportunity to acquire self-knowledge. Yet assessment can also create pride and a sense of achievement - Stewart and Richardson (2000) suggest that not assessing reflective activities may indicate to students that reflection is 'not really valued'.

From delivering classes on employability, the author's recommendation would be to integrate reflection into all programmes as a compulsory embedded element and grade work using Eisner's concept of 'connoisseurship' (see above, p101). By incorporating reflection from the start, it will not add to the perceived assessment load, and can get students to value reflection by embedding it in their substantive modules.

Again, Hargreaves (1997) has highlighted problems in the use of private information in reflections, and proponents of reflection assessment need to address the moral and ethical dilemmas there may be in relation to ownership of information and respect for confidentiality; with, perhaps the formulation of some guidelines around 'informed consent'.

Conclusions

In spite of some of the drawbacks outlined, there are tangible benefits to assessing reflection since reflective learning can take place over an extended time frame, and if used as a diagnostic tool, (as opposed to traditional summative assessment), it will allow students to rectify learning problems and keep on track, which will help improve student retention.

If assessment tasks are to be graded, then inter-assessor reliability would be of less concern if 'poor', 'good' and 'excellent' were used as the only categories of evaluation. When coupled with self-assessment, reflection can encourage honest debate about student progression, and help counteract the perception of assessor bias.

Reflection assessment may not be reliable in the pedagogic sense, (reproducibility of assessment results), but it is valid, and deserves a central place in the assessment system. Students need to discover they can learn from themselves, and not just from books.

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