

Reflective Writing and Re-usable Learning Objects

Helen Pokorny
Centre for Academic and Professional Development
London Metropolitan University

Keywords: *Reusable Learning Object (RLO), reflection, reflective writing*

Introduction

This article describes the development of a re-usable learning object (RLO) designed to support reflective writing on the 'Studying...' suite of three Higher Education Orientation (HEO) modules. These modules are located in the London Metropolitan Business School (LMBS) and are completed by around 1000 students annually. The 'Studying...' series curriculum is designed around a Tate Modern Merchandising Project undertaken as a series of tasks linked to an interactive website (www.learning.londonmet.ac.uk/quickstart) supported by class contact and a variety of electronic resources (www.learning.londonmet.ac.uk/bsmstudy). The final assessment is in the form of a portfolio with a reflective statement in which students review their learning on the module. One of the module leaders commenting on this aspect of assessment reported that:

*Most reflective writing is too descriptive, vague and safe - as you could predict! There is not enough detail on **what has been learned** from the events and especially not enough on concrete **future plans** for development. Also students tend to blame others or the system for problems - or suggest that everything is fine and the course (and of course the tutors) is wonderful. Finally they miss opportunities to **reflect** on the content of their portfolio – tutors' comments on their presentation, their success at meeting targets from their proforma etc. That is not to suggest that there are not some very good examples of reflection.*

Aims of the RLO

- To provide students with an RLO which supports the reflective writing element of their assessment
- To offer students a model of reflection to support ongoing personal development planning

Objectives

- To provide a model for reflective learning
- To provide a case for doing it

- To provide a case for doing it in writing,
- To provide guidance to support the process of reflective writing.

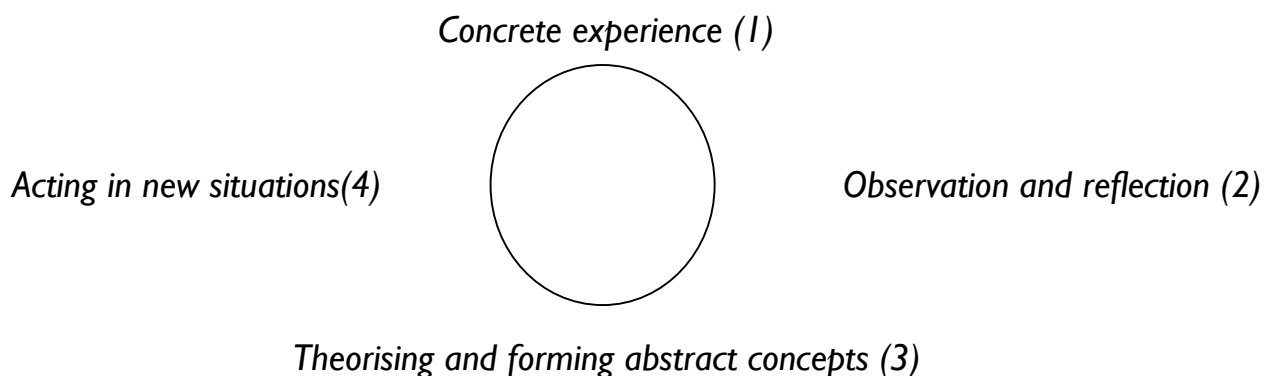
Team

- Debbie Holley, London Metropolitan Business School,
- Dave Griffiths, Richard Haynes and Helen Pokorny, Centre for Academic and Professional Development (CAPD),
- Karl Smith, Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning – Reusable Learning Objects (CETL-RLO).

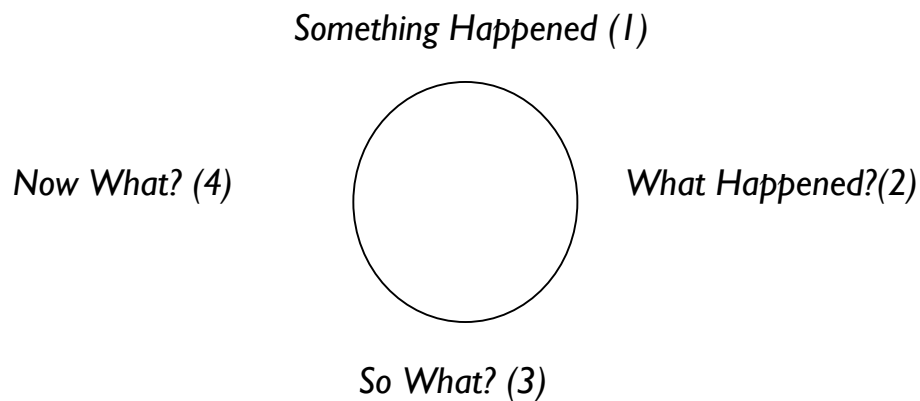
Rationale for the design

The RLO was designed with the intention of providing a range of interactive on-line opportunities for students to engage with the concept of reflection and reflective writing. It uses a variety of multi-media resources including graphics, video, audio and text downloads and animations. Structured feedback is provided through short quizzes and activities in order to encourage self-awareness and reflection upon the personal relevance of the process.

The approach to reflection in the ‘Studying...’ series module booklets derives from the Kolb and Fry (1975) model of learning from experience, commonly used in HE . This has four elements:



The model, though prevalent in HE, is not without critics, the elements of experience, reflection, theorising and action are generally presented in this linear manner which is criticised as too simplistic (Smith, 2001). Kolb and Fry (1975) themselves argued that the process should be viewed as a continuous spiral and may begin at any stage. However the model provides a simple means of communicating the key requirements of this process. Within the ‘Studying...’ modules the model presented is that of Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (2003) taken from the field of management development:



Whilst this is clearly derived from Kolb and Fry (1975) the language is easily accessible to new students, this is important because the process of assessment shapes reflection and constructs learning (and learners) in particular ways. One of the tasks of the RLO is to reinforce the assessors' expectations. The tutor quoted above feels that the reflective writing is too often 'vague' and 'safe' and wishes to see more *detail on what has been learned from the events, reflection on content and future plans for development*. Such expectations relate to different stages of the cycle and are present in both the assessment criteria, and in the module booklets wherein students are encouraged to be honest and present their weaknesses. Dyke (2006:116) would suggest one reason for the 'vague' and 'safe' writing is that '[r]eflection in learning needs to be open and concerned with weakness as well as strengths, while assessment by its very nature is concerned with the presentation of strengths'. The RLO provides the opportunity to reinforce what it is that tutors want and to model the process of learning from weaknesses as well as strengths.

Kolb and Fry (1975) also related effective learning to performance in the four different elements of the cycle – different learning styles. Many writers are critical of this concept arguing that the claims made for the four learning styles are extravagant; that there are many alternative ways of perceiving learning styles; that they do not apply to all situations and that they take little account of different cultural experiences (Smith, 2001). Learning styles questionnaires are popular in HE and students encounter many different versions which place them into specific categories of learners. In the context of the RLO, designing a quiz around the stages of the cycle, rather than defining the student as one particular type of learner offers the opportunity to reinforce the importance of looking at preferences and taking an holistic approach across the whole cycle.

Kolb's (1984) work has also been criticised for presenting an individualised, solitary account of learning (Smith 2001) whereas writers such as Lave and Wenger (1991) and Dyke (2006) have emphasised the social context of learning and the discursive processes by which participants become socialised into a community of practice. The implication is that in order for students to be reflective rather than introspective, there needs to be dialogue and feedback from others including peers

and tutors. The RLO offers an opportunity to model social interactions, to show some students' experiences on the module and to stress the importance of dialogue and different forms of feedback.

Kolb (1984) acknowledged concerns expressed about the privileging of the individual's own perspective in the learning process. He wrote about potential tensions between 'objective social knowledge and subjective life experience' (Dyke 2006: 110). He argued that the interaction of the two was key to his approach, hence the theorising stage of the cycle i.e. theory is tempered by practice and vice versa as a reflexive process. The RLO highlights the subjective life experience of the students - their insights, feelings, experiences of entering HE. In using the RLO it is necessary to provide opportunities to theorise this experience in the academic context, to explore what it means to write, read and think as a member of the particular disciplinary community and to provide further opportunities to engage with, and to practise those forms of communication and critical thinking that are valued. These connections to theorising are made through the curriculum content and delivery. The RLO provides a set of questions to prompt reflection based on the notion of 'questioning insight' which can be used to reinforce these connections, so that although technologically the RLO can stand-alone, pedagogically it has to be integrated into the curriculum.

RLOs are time consuming and expensive to produce. Ideally it should be possible to '...reuse and repurpose learning resources to meet the perceived needs of different students...however [many have] to be taken on an all or nothing basis' Boyle (2003:1). The context for the RLO is very clearly the module within which it is located. However although the RLO has been referred to thus far as a single entity it is in fact composed of several different units which address different sub-goals e.g. understanding the theory, learning styles, modelling processes, questioning etc. These elements may perhaps be useful as individual RLOs or integrated into different curricula contexts. They are listed below and illustrate how the rationale above developed into a practical resource.

RLO Elements

<p>Reflective Learning Theory</p>	<p>This RLO provides a brief introduction to the concept of reflection, Kolb (1984) and other theorists, and makes a visual connection between the Kolb and Fry (1975) and the Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (2003) models. It includes an audio download of the text. The purpose is to provide a rationale for the reflective learning process which is linked to the wider context of personal and professional development.</p>
<p>Learning Styles Quiz</p>	<p>This RLO presents the learning styles approach as a fun activity to engage students; it reinforces the interconnectedness of different aspects of the cycle and stresses the students' ability to influence their own performance across the whole cycle.</p>

Questions to Prompt Reflection	The Pedler <i>et al</i> (2003) cycle is framed around four questions. Using these as headings further questions were derived from Moon (2002) and Bourner (2003) which students can download and apply to their own circumstances. This offers a practical framework without becoming a restrictive template.
Individual Reflection Video	By modelling the process of reflection as a deliberate activity undertaken by a tutor and student on the module students are able to see how the process of dialogue makes visible some of a student's learning on the module.
Group Reflection Video	The video illustrates the diversity of students' group work experiences and the way in which, at times, they struggle to make sense of them. It provides an opportunity to make visible some of potential learning from the group task that may go unacknowledged without peer dialogue and feedback.
Reflective Writing Rationale	This RLO turns attention to the writing process. It draws very much on the ideas of Eraut (1994) and his work on tacit knowledge to develop some questions about why reflective writing might be a useful activity. These are offered in the form of a drag and drop activity.
Reflective Writing Content	Recognising the necessity to be selective about the content of reflective writing, this RLO contains a graphic with links to ideas about the type of content that might be relevant in this particular assessment context.
Sample Writing	This RLO is in the form of a short paragraph from a piece of reflective writing. Students are asked to comment upon it in relation to the Pedler <i>et al</i> (2003) cycle and to consider further questions that it might be useful for the writer to explore as s/he continues. It demonstrates that the elements of the cycle are interlinked and can be present within one paragraph. It is an attempt to provide an approach to developing reflective writing whilst avoiding the pitfalls of a providing a model answer.

The RLO is available for peer and student feedback. Analysis of this feedback will help the RLO CETL to evaluate the effectiveness and reusability of the resource and determine whether or not it is deemed sufficiently reusable to join the RLO repository that is being developed by the RLO CETL. This RLOs can be accessed as one resource at www.RLO-cetl.ac.uk or as individual elements at www.learning.londonmet.ac.uk/bssmstudy (Electronic Resources).

References

- Boyle, T. (2003) 'Design principles for authoring dynamic, reusable learning objects' *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol 19 No. 1, pp 46-58.
- Bourner, T. (2003) 'Assessing reflective learning' *Education and Training*, Vol 45, No5, pp267-272.
- Dyke, M (2006) The role of the 'other' in reflection, knowledge formation and action in late modernity, *Int. Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol., 25, No 2, March-April, pp 105-123.

Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing professional knowledge and competence*, Routledge.

Kolb, D. A. and Fry, R. (1975) 'Towards an applied theory of experiential learning'; in C Cooper (ed) *Theories of Group Process*, London: John Wiley.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall.

Lave J. and Wenger E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* Cambridge University Press, UK.

Moon, J. (2002) *Learning Journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development*. Kogan Page.

Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J.G, and Boydell, T. (2003) *A Managers Guide to Leadership*, McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead.

Smith, M. K. (2001) 'David Kolb on experiential learning' *Encyclopaedia of informal education* [www.infed.org]

Biographical note

Helen Pokorny is a member of the Centre for Academic & Professional Development (CAPD) at London Metropolitan University, in the role of Learning, Teaching & Curriculum Development Coordinator. She is a national expert in the area of accreditation of prior experiential learning and actively involved in research into the student learning experience in order to inform the development of learning resources and pedagogical approaches to assist students' engagement with higher education.

Email: h.pokorny@londonmet.ac.uk