



Guide for Busy Academics No. 4 Learning through reflection

1. Introduction

Personal development planning (PDP) can involve different forms of reflection and reflective learning. Much has been written and said about reflection in recent times, but it remains a somewhat mysterious activity – or is it a capacity? This guide provides an introduction to reflection and reflective learning in support of the development of PDP within HE.

2. What is reflection?

A 'common-sense' approach to reflection suggests that it lies somewhere around the notion of learning. We reflect on something in order to consider it in more detail eg 'Let me reflect on that for a moment'. Usually we reflect because we have a purpose for reflecting – a goal to reach. Sometimes we find ourselves 'being reflective' and out of that 'being reflective', something 'pops up'. Then there has been no conscious purpose as such – but there is a useful outcome and there may have been a subconscious purpose. It is also apparent that we reflect on things that are relatively complicated. We do not reflect on a simple addition sum – or the route to the corner shop. We reflect on things for which there is not an obvious or immediate solution. Often the latter will be instigated by or associated with a range of feelings and the experience of such reflection may be emotional or spiritual. The experience may be pleasurable or uncomfortable.

Generally reflection is a means of working on what we know already and it generates new knowledge. Consciously or unconsciously we put into the reflection process thoughts, ideas, experience, knowledge, theory and we may seek new information. We draw out of it something that accords with the purpose for which we reflected or new prompts for further reflection. On this basis, a simple definition of reflection might be:

Reflection is a form of mental processing that we use to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to gain a better understanding of relatively complicated or unstructured ideas and is largely based on the reprocessing of knowledge, understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess.

Reflection has a role in:

- academic and non-academic learning
- self development
- critical review
- considering our own processes of mental functioning
- decision-making
- emancipation and empowerment and so on.

There is a close relationship between reflection and emotion or feelings and many would suggest that the use of reflection in academic contexts provides an appropriate channel for exploration or expression of this human function. Self-awareness and control of emotions is an important factor in academic performance and PDP provides opportunities for emotional engagement with subject learning.

3. Reflection and learning

Reflection is not just an 'add-on-extra' to academic learning, but it is an essential component of good quality learning and the representation of that learning. Reflection seems to be a part of the kinds of learning in which learners try to understand material that they encounter and to relate it to what they already knew. Relating new material to what one knows already may mean reflecting on what one knows and modifying it (deep approach). Reflection does not seem to have a role in the learning in which learners try just to retain new information without creating deep links with the new ideas (surface approach). Reflection will also be involved in the process of representing learning – when, for example, a learner's understanding is tested in a format that demands reprocessing of the ideas (eg an essay). It is less or uninvolved in an approach that requires reiteration of the responses in the same format as the original knowledge. So reflection is a fundamental feature of a deeper approach to learning.

In addition to being a part of good quality learning, reflection also supports learning by providing the right conditions for learning. For example:

- being reflective slows down learning, because it requires time for a learner to reprocess ideas.
- it enables learners to feel that they 'own' their knowledge and understanding because they have been a part of its creation.
- ability in reflection often implies ability in metacognition – where the learner is able to consider his/her own learning behaviour, metacognitive ability is associated with effective learning.
- material on which we reflect is relatively complicated or unstructured material. It challenges learners and when they are challenged, they gain greater abilities in dealing with difficult material of learning.

4. Reflection and PDP

Reflective learning will already be incidental in the academic activities of most students but deliberate strategies for its use will make students more conscious of it so that it can become an integral part of their approach to learning. There are many vehicles for reflective learning in the curriculum:

- learning journals, logs etc
- the use of portfolios
- reflection on work experiences
- reflection on placement experiences beyond the deliberate curriculum
- in the context of peer and self assessment
- in the context of careers work, counselling or student or personal development work.

5. Reflection as a strategy for student learning

There are some things to think about when asking students to reflect. Some academic colleagues may not understand what place reflective activities have within the curriculum.

Some students will not understand what you want them to do. They will be unused to being asked to process information that is not from a book or given by a lecturer and they may be uneasy about the use of the first person in an academic context.

Formalising reflection has other implications that need to be taken into account. When, in the context of every-day life, we reflect on something, there is no need to explain the subject matter of the reflection. In the formal situation, some kind of description of the issue / event (etc) will be required – and is likely to become part of the reflective process. The description is important, but it may also become a 'sticking point' in the activity in that there are many reports of students who do not seem able, without help, to deepen their reflection beyond the descriptive account. A means of overcoming this seems to be to introduce reflection as a two-part process.

Initially students are helped to understand what they should do in a reflective task. Later, when they are at least managing descriptive reflection, they are helped to deepen their reflection to levels from which greater value will develop. A series of exercises will help with both of these stages.

See also:

[Reflection in Higher Education Learning](#)

Jenny Moon, University of Exeter

6. Assessment

The issue of assessment of reflection needs careful thought. The most important decision is whether or not to assess it, and if the latter, how you will ensure that students engage in the task. If you are going to assess it the following points may be helpful:

- Express the role of reflection in the learning outcomes for the module or the programme outcomes for the programme (in the programme specification)
- Think about the purpose of reflection – and the purpose will guide the writing of learning outcomes and will be a basis for writing assessment criteria
- Think about your strategy for assessment before you give the work to students and tell them not only that the work will be assessed, but how it will be assessed, ie the criteria that will be used
- Think, in particular, about whether you are concerned with developing students' ability to reflect or the product of the reflection. If it is the latter, then you can assess by many of the standard means – essay, examination etc.
- If you are concerned about students learning to reflect then you will need to assess their ability to reflect – and to think about the criteria that express this. You may need to think about the depth of the reflective activity, for example.
- Provide students with examples of reflective writing and encourage them to evaluate what learning is being gained through the process.

Jenny Moon, University of Exeter