Reflective Learning for Students  
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Prof Mairead Brady, School of Business – (MB)  
Prof Mark Faulkner, School of English – (MF)  
Prof Cicely Roche, School of Pharmacy and Academic Practice Teaching Fellow – (CR)

In this interview three academics from Trinity share their experiences of how they use reflective learning with their students. What follows is a conversation that considers the benefits of embedding reflective learning opportunities into the curriculum. It also highlights some of the challenges of using this form of assessment and considers how to manage the reflective process to enhance student learning.

**COF: How do you use reflection to enhance student learning?**

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<td><strong>MF:</strong></td>
<td>I’ve primarily used reflection early in students’ university life to help them make the transition from second level. I teach a subject - medieval language and literature - which students have very rarely encountered before and which can seem intimidating. I’ve found that giving students the opportunity to write relatively informally about their initial responses to the material builds their confidence and helps small teaching groups cohere around a common sense of purpose. What students write provides invaluable, weekly feedback on how a course is going. I typically give students a very loose prompt (e.g. write about something you’ve found interesting or surprising from this week’s lecture this week) and ask them to write 250 or so words on a public discussion board hosted on Blackboard. They receive a small amount of credit for doing this weekly over the course.</td>
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<td><strong>MB:</strong></td>
<td>I use reflection very differently and for reasonably high stakes assessment - 40% of the final grade. At the end of my modules student must write a 1,500 word reflective essay on one of two topics which allows them to take an individual perspective aligned to module readings/material. These modules are at UG (1) and PG (2) level. There is no visibility or ongoing input or feedback. I find that the reflective format enhances their learning by capturing their own ideas and understanding in relation to core issues discussed in the module. When I used the essay format I found that the essays were more formulaic and that I was unsure of the student learning or the depth of the student engagement. Many of the essay had similar content with the writing style rather than the content as the differentiator. I find that this is not present in this format and that this method allows them the space for reflecting/thinking about the issues at depth and to move the subject beyond the readings/material.</td>
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<td><strong>MF:</strong></td>
<td>Your use of the reflective essay here sounds a little bit like the assessment I set for a Sophister option on translating medieval poetry this term, which required students to reflect on what they’d learned through reading translation theory, studying other people’s</td>
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<td>CR:</td>
<td>I use reflection to enhance Undergraduate student learning in a final term (Addiction Pharmacy) Module - where journals entries following weekly two hour workshops with a variety of external contributors collectively account for 15% of the Module marks. Students use the Journal tool on Blackboard to record a 150-200 word reflection within 6 days of each workshop - requiring them to reflect on each ‘workshop’ before attending the subsequent one. They are guided by a detailed rubric - provided to them at the outset of the series of workshops. This Journal activity (along with a team-based activity) replaced assessment by 500 word essays - i.e. students previously completed a 500 word report on each of the 8 workshops.</td>
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<td>MB:</td>
<td>moving the assessment to a journal tool is interesting as this allows the student to build but also to show engagement with each workshop. I tried that before and found that the students found the workload challenging. I asked them to reflect on 6 of the 8 stages at a minimum. The rubrics idea is great but did you have any concerns that were realised that it directed the student’s reflection or was the authentic voice of the student still evident?</td>
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<td>CR:</td>
<td>I believe that students must first learn the process of reflection/reflective practice, and therefore I am not overly concerned if there is some ‘direction’ at undergraduate level - it’s been my experience that many students still need that direction at SS level. I don’t observe a lack of the student voice! Students that are ‘accomplished’ at the reflective process demonstrate (and voice) that the process (of regular reflection) becomes easier with time. The discipline of weekly reflection (evidenced by the record on Blackboard being time-stamped) also increased the likelihood that they engaged with the material in a manner that stimulated interaction at subsequent workshops - which certainly has been the feedback from workshop leaders.</td>
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**COF: How can reflective learning cultivate the graduate attributes and/or prepare students for the workplace?**

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<td>MF:</td>
<td>I think the fact that I typically make students’ reflections public gives them confidence sharing their ideas. Students are also invited to comment on each others’ ideas, and I think this opportunity is helpful in developing their skills at giving feedback, and particularly at doing it remotely which is ever more important with the increasing use of email. More generally, writing a reflective journal helps students’ writing, and particularly their ability to write in a range of genres.</td>
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<td>MB:</td>
<td>The focus on thinking independently, critically and creativity is what I am hoping to engender through reflection. The reflection also allows them to move the knowledge beyond the field to develop a wider broader engagement with the issues. It of course aligns with the personal development goal of ongoing reflection. The world of work or life skills in general requires people who can self reflect to grow and develop. It is like a life skill. The ability to critically evaluating how your behaviour affected the outcome and how you acted to change this behaviour and the outcomes of that intervention is a skill that can be used in life as well as work.</td>
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**CR:** | The focus of the reflections underpins attributes to support students to 'develop continuously' throughout their careers. This series of reflections seeks to instil in students the 'habit' of reflecting in a systematic and ongoing manner, and, by aligning with a team-based task, to reinforce that reflections can be revisited (referred to as 'harvesting') in an outcomes-focused manner. The module's subject matter, the role of the pharmacist in managing drug misuse, prompts them to consider how their professional expertise can and should be used to help address societal challenges…. i.e. to 'act responsibly'.

**COF: How do you implement reflective learning in large classes?**

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**MF:** | I wouldn’t see there being particular challenges to implementing reflective learning in a large class. To preserve the community of learning aspects of a small group of students each writing and sharing a learning journal, one might subdivide a larger group into several subgroups, so that students feel they are communicating not with the whole cohort but with a knowable subcohort - this is easy on Blackboard, I think. |
**MB:** | The class sizes are 175+, 80+ and 60+ and I have had no real issues in this regard. I have used part of a class to explore reflective writing and then discussed the ongoing challenges each week. The students were provided with youtube links, journal articles and other material to support the reflective writing aspect. The use of Socrative student response system within class allowed for an open discussion and feedback during the module. In this way students shared their concerns and challenges with me and with each other. This appeared to support the student in the how rather than the what to write about aspect of the assessment. The excel questions and answers was posted to Blackboard for easy access and the tracking analytics showed that these were used particularly around the due date! |
**CR:** | Class size is 70 to 80 students. My preference is to use the online Journal in Blackboard when activities are aligned to a specific module - but ePortfolios or a journal that is student centered rather than module defined would be preferred when students’ journal entries relate to the totality of their undergraduate experience(s) and/ or experiential placements. |
**COF: How do you prepare students for this new type of learning?**

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<td>MF:</td>
<td>I usually devote a substantial portion of the first session of a course to introducing the reflective learning. I stress that the first week is a trial run and that there are no right or wrong approaches. I will periodically dip into the learning journals and comment on any that I feel are particularly interesting or successful. Different cohorts tend to end up establishing different parameters for the task, which is itself extremely interesting.</td>
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<td>MB:</td>
<td>As above and just managing their concerns throughout the assessment period. There is a common comment that ‘this is the first time I have been asked to do something like this in college’ and ‘I have never used my own voice in assessments - I am not sure that I am able’. So there is a sense of unease at the beginning but clarity of explanation and the continuous week on week engagement seems to work well. Students can be more comfortable with a rigid more formal traditional assessment criteria or the standard essay</td>
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<td>MF:</td>
<td>The sophisters doing the option on Translating Medieval Poetry were definitely more anxious than the first years I’ve used reflective assessment with. This suggests there’s an advantage to introducing these methods early. It obviously also helps if the course can be designed so that the stakes are low and there’s time for practice and feedback.</td>
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<td>CR:</td>
<td>I introduce the rubric (underpinned by Hatton &amp; Smith’s levels of reflection) at the first workshop. Once 2 reflections have been completed I then co-deliver a workshop that addresses ‘peer review’ - during which students ‘peer review’ a colleague’s reflections against the rubric. The reflections following this peer review workshop tend to emphasise ‘how unexpectedly difficult it is’ to peer review, and how the process of ‘peer review’ makes them read the rubric in a way they had not done before. (In the first few years I used to review each journal and provide formative feedback to each student after two entries - I believe that the peer feedback approach is much more effective version of formative assessment … and they are building another essential skill, that of peer review, in support of ‘continuous development’. )</td>
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<td>MB:</td>
<td>Great idea as I assume the workload for you was quite onerous as it was originally designed. I found that even commenting on just one set of posts took hours when I had the practice online so any ideas to lower the workload without compromising the pedagogical benefits is great. I assume that students writing with the awareness of peer review might change the voice or reinterpret the guidelines to conform? Are these anonymous?</td>
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| CR:     | re workload - yes, if took about 8 hours of review and feedback from my workload - although I added a workshop (and have an alumni co-deliver it with me). However, once I had done it once, I realised that it really did provide additional benefit to the students. They are not anonymous. During this module there is a group activity (writing a letter using a wiki) for which the students self-select into groups of 5 or 6. For this ‘peer review of reflections workshop’ I get them to sit in their groups. The group members are in
**Speaker** | **Statement**
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'Mineral order' online. Member 1 review member 2, member 2 reviews member 3 etc. Hence it is known others that review, but it's not a 'swop'.

I should add, by way of explanation, that I firmly believe that peer review is the flip side of the reflection concept - they are inextricably linked and one should aim to include peer review development when 'teaching' reflection ... after all, in lifelong learning and development it's the peer review process that enables us to 'see' our unconscious incompetencies!

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**COF: What are the common pitfalls of assessing reflection? How do you manage these when they occur?**

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<td><strong>MF:</strong></td>
<td>I think many of the pitfalls of assessing reflection are in fact pitfalls of writing reflection, most of which can be avoided by careful framing and scaffolding of the task. The hardest moments in assessing reflection come where a student has clearly put a lot of effort in, but not really moved beyond the description of how a particular text or task affected them into analysis. Plenty of practice, along with comments on a group’s reflections that identify good examples, seem to be a good antidote.</td>
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| **MB:** | My greatest concern is that they have audience awareness - so that they are writing for me or for the grade. That they are conscious of trying to align with my way of thinking. I worry that the judgmental grading aspect may limit their real engagement with reflection or the depth of their reflection. I am aware of this when grading. I would like to note that I find this type of assessment enjoyable to grade as the reflections are so insightful and there is clear evidence from most students that they have grappled with both reflection and their own learning. Many students comment afterwards that it was only through this reflection that they clearly understood the module material and the challenges discussed. Having to personally reflect on the issue gave more students the ability to study, engage, evaluate and synthesis the material and this is all clearly visible in much of the work. Like Mark I can see the descriptive only student clearly or the student who did not engage with the topic - both in the minority. I have a rubric that I use linked to depth of engagement, synthesis of material (which is critical) and insightful and interesting regardless of perspective, which provides me with the clarity I need. |

| **MF:** | Mairead’s first point definitely chimes with work I got one year when I attempted to get students to produce a reflection on what they felt that got out of studying medieval literature. Unsurprisingly, they all found it fascinating! Since then, I’ve tried to set genuinely open questions (e.g. what’s the best approach to translating a medieval poem?), where there’s no obvious ‘right’ answer that I the lecturer am expecting. |
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**CR:**  | I find that when students ask for feedback regarding how to improve their reflections, they are often looking for a ‘right’ answer or ‘sample answer’. It can be difficult to get them to realise that even when the incident or concept on which they intended to reflect is/was absolutely appropriate, their writing (in my case all are written) e.g. struggles to move beyond the descriptive.  

When they ask for feedback, I ask them to grade the reflection against the rubric - highlighting on the rubric instances where they believe the ‘descriptor’ for a criterion differs from the ‘grade’ I gave them … and, once I receive that email, we arrange to meet at a mutually agreeable time.  

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**COF: What one piece of advice would you give to a lecturer thinking of introducing reflective learning?**  
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**MF:**  | ‘Give it a go’. Using reflective learning has immeasurably enhanced my understanding of what students enjoy, how they approach medieval language and literature, and what they find difficult, with inevitable consequences for the way they teach. I’ve also seen students who’ve really struggled with academic writing blossom when they’ve been scaffolded towards it by a reflective task. Regularly using reflective writing is one of the most rewarding things I’ve done in my teaching.  

**MB:**  | The one piece of advice is to ask others and to build on the resources and understanding already available. I would also add not to be too concerned with the students initial and sometimes ongoing concerns as they learn a lot from this type of engagement. Once the clarity in the guidelines is available that allows for ease of grading for you and ease of completion by the students. There is further reward which is insight into both your own and your student’s world. This is compounded for me in that I ask them to explore how technology supported or detracted from their learning. I thus receive so much in depth information which guides my technology use and the development of the module for the coming year.  

**CR:**  | The ideal situation would be to agree a detailed rubric to guide and support them, and try to acquire sufficient time to ‘teach’ them how to write a reflection! (... or other format, if not written). It seems to me that we have a tendency to tell students to ‘do’ a reflection, or complete a reflective cycle in a portfolio, without supporting students to explore e.g. the differences between descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection and critical reflection.  

Make a plan to deal with ethical and emotional concerns that can arise, and be read by the lecturer, when students journal. ‘Readers of reflections sometimes will come across concerning revelations. These typically consist of psychological distress on the part of the writer or depictions of unprofessional, illegal, or troublesome statements or actions by the writer or others’ (Aronson,
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<td>2011:202). Where these revelations appear in online journals when students are on 'placements', clarity with respect to immediate action(s) can be very important - in the full knowledge that, while the reflection can be a misleading and/ or ill-informed opinion, it would be irresponsible to disregard comments that suggest the possibility of risk to the writer or others.</td>
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<td>MB: I think this is a critical issue that deserves more discussion in general. I encountered some issues that raised some concerns which left me with a slight sense of unease. Does the student assume because I have been told that I will react or does the student contend that non reaction is agreement or consent? I received such interesting and reflective insights into their world, their engagement and challenges that the rich information is valued but there is a risk.</td>
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<td>MF: This is certainly an important issue. But I don't know that it should keep people from trying the format: I can't think of any occasion in five years of using reflective journals where I've come across any 'unprofessional, illegal, or troublesome statements', but maybe I'll have a slew next year!</td>
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