



The Role of Reflection in Learning

What is reflection?

Reflective practice is a deliberate way of thinking that leads to change in action (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). In the context of education, reflection can help students to consolidate and assess their learning of a discipline and its practices. The development of reflective skills and the process of engaging in reflective practice also prompts self-learning and encourages the integration of academic knowledge with relevant personal and professional experience.

Why is reflection a desired graduate attribute?

It is widely recognised that our graduates are entering a 'supercomplex' world where they will be confronted with problems or challenges that are often described as 'wicked,' 'messy,' or 'indeterminate' (Knight and Page, 2007). Throughout their careers our graduates will be expected to understand how they work and perform, to play to their strengths, to identify and work on their weaknesses, and to plan their professional development through reflecting on and adjusting their practice. 'To develop continuously' is thus an important graduate attribute linked to reflection. The ability to reflect is also a precursor to and enabler of Trinity's other graduate attributes: to think independently, to act responsibly, and to communicate effectively.

Why is reflection challenging for students?

Reflection is more than just thinking about a subject; it needs to draw from query and enquiry. However, many students entering University are 18–20 years old, and their ability to reflect, let alone capture that reflection in writing, is rarely developed by this stage of their education. Struggling with the very concept, their reflections can be descriptive rather than critical. There is also a risk that they will write what they think their assessor will want to hear. The development of reflective skills needs to be supported and scaffolded by appropriate teaching methodologies and assessment strategies. Ideally reflection should be introduced early in the programme, so students can practice and develop their reflective writing skills. Careful curriculum planning, with a programme focus, is required.

How can we assess reflection?

Research highlights the need for reflective assessments to be contextualised to the postgraduation context (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). It is important to connect the reflection to learning or program outcomes, so that students know why they are being asked to reflect. When devising criteria, it can help to assess the *process* of reflection and not the *product*. To help students understand what this reflection might look like, rubrics should be shared with them in advance and discussed in class. It might also be useful to discuss some models of reflection within class (such as Gibbs's reflective cycle, Boud's experiential learning, Kolb's learning cycle, or Mezirow's transformational learning).



Embedding reflection into our teaching, learning and assessment

Reflective writing	Learning journals/diaries Memos Reflective notes Critical Incident Technique Critical Portfolio; ePortfolio Reflective self-evaluation Reflective peer evaluation	Morrow, 2010 (adapted)
Diagrammatic representation	Concept maps, mind maps, and conceptual diagrams	
Creative representation	Pictures/images Story writing Videoing/film-making	
Perspective taking	Stakeholder/service user views Reflective interview	
Interaction	Peer or group-discussion Problem-based learning Service user involvement in teaching	

Supporting learning through reflection: Examples of possible approaches

Example 1: Dr. Cicely Roche, School of Pharmacy

Final-year pharmacy students undertaking a module on Addiction Pharmacy attended weekly two-hour workshops with a range of experts on addiction pharmacy, and posted a short reflection on each workshop to their online journal within six days. The integrated nature of the series of workshops facilitated bringing practice to students in a manner that supported an experiential learning component to the development and demonstration of competencies related to reflective practice. The series of reflections drove “real time” student engagement with the workshops. Rubrics were developed to align with attributes underpinning reflective practice, namely: (a) reflective depth, (b) professional concepts and links with the role of the pharmacist in managing drug misuse (content and context), (c) expression (attention to clear, concise and evidence based expression). (See Roche, 2014, available at: <http://www.mdpi.com/2226-4787/2/2/175/htm>. Includes rubrics as appendices).

Example 2: Prof Mark Faulkner, School of English

Reflective writing exercises have been an invaluable part of modules that students encounter in their first year of an English degree, when making the transition from school to university.

In particular, reflective writing:

- ❖ Helps students take ownership of the course material
- ❖ Helps students to see the originality and validity of their own ideas when their perception might be that there is a monolithic ‘right’ answer



- ❖ Gives regular practice at writing
- ❖ Can be used to inform the topics emphasised in tutorials
- ❖ Provides indirect but often very useful feedback for convener and tutors on how the course is proceeding

In the first-year module that has made the most extensive use of reflective writing, students were asked to make a weekly post to a discussion board hosted on Blackboard. The prompt was kept deliberately open: to write 200 words about something they had found interesting from that week's lecture. Posts could be read by all members of a particular seminar group, and students were encouraged to comment on each others' posts. Each tutorial teacher could read the week's posts before the tutorial and use them to decide what to emphasise. This learning journal contributed 10% of the student's overall mark for the module, with students told that a full set of posts would earn them a grade of 70, and that additional marks were available for commenting substantively on other students' posts.

Example 3: Hannah Kilgore, Office of the Vice-President for Global Relations

The Visiting Student Blogger Programme recruited several bloggers per term, and bloggers either served for a semester, summer or year, depending on how long they were studying at Trinity. They provided three blogs per term, which were posted on the World of Trinity Blog: <https://tcdglobal.wordpress.com/category/study-abroad/>. By the end of Hilary Term 2017, there were sixty-four blogs. Blog topics have included both academic and non-academic subjects, with wide-ranging foci. It benefited students by providing them with the tools to better articulate and think critically about the benefits of studying abroad, important skills for students to develop. The bloggers also gained professional experience useful for their future careers, i.e. professional experience for CVs and job applications, samples for writing portfolios, and promotion of their photos and writing through Global Relations social media accounts.

Note: This document is not a statement of formal university policy, but rather a teaching and learning resource produced by the Trinity Education Fellows for the Trinity Education Project.

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