Reflection

Reflection is a pedagogically and theoretically contentious concept in Higher Education. It incorporates multiple approaches that are open to interpretation and quite context specific. That said one thing most will agree upon is that it is a necessary part of quality practices in Higher Education which should happen at multiple points in the learning and teaching cycle (developing outcomes, constructing Unit of Study outlines, choosing learning and teaching methods, assessment, and evaluation). In this very brief introduction we have drawn out some starting concepts and ideas for your benefit, as well as a list of useful references.

What is reflection?

In simple terms reflection is a form of conscious response (some say a processing phase) to a situation or event, and the experiences within that situation or event. In our case this involves, but is not limited to, a learning and teaching situation/event, and can include all manner of formal and informal occasions that are often quite complex (for example: lectures, field trips, laboratories, practicum placement, tutorial, participation in an assessment task, group work, unplanned occurrences, responses to student or staff comments, world events, personal or internal feelings). For the teacher and student these responses will include what they think, feel, do and conclude both at the time and/or after the experience. In this respect reflection is an active and aware process that can occur anytime and anywhere. It functions to help us, or our students, to re-capture, re-live, make sense of, think about, contextualise, and evaluate an experience in order to make decisions and choices about what we have experienced, how we have experienced, and what we will or won’t do next.

Following Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) in this Guide we view reflection in the learning and teaching context as:

a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations. It may take place in isolation or in association with others. It can be done well or badly, successfully or unsuccessfully. (p 19)

In the literature reflection is consistently cited as ‘good’ pedagogical practice and professional development. It is also intrinsically linked to scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching at the University of Sydney, and is further a requirement for promotion.

Critical reflection

Some use the terms reflection and critical reflection interchangeably. Those, for example, writing in the tradition of Freire (1972, 1974) advocate a kind of critical reflection which is more cognisant of the various socio-cultural factors and subjectivities which impinge upon teachers and students. The practice of reflection as viewed as ideologically transformatiive.
Brookfield (1995) suggests that teaching is not an innocent practice and further that becoming aware of our own assumptions about what we do and how we do it is both a puzzling and contradictory process. He further states that reflection becomes critical when its purpose shifts to firstly understanding “how considerations of power undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interactions”, and secondly, to unearthing and questioning “the assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interests” (p 8) For example: assumptions about our work, our life, university life, students, learning and teaching, working in groups, society, knowledge, discourse, and power.

_Becoming a critically reflective teacher_

Whilst understandings and practice of reflection may show some commonality across a range of disciplines and contexts, the addition of the qualifier _critical_ to _reflection_ often signifies a deeper consideration and focus upon:

- recognizing and appreciating difference and diversity from a number of angles (for example race, ethnicity, gender, class, culture, religion, disability, age) and how these factors impact on learning and teaching
- challenging and dealing with the taken for granted assumptions about teaching, learning, learners, and the learning environment
- identifying and negotiating how power operates in an always contested learning and teaching context
- nurturing, facilitating and enabling a learning and teaching environment which challenges students to think critically and morally about a variety of issues
- initiating socially engaged lifelong and transformative learning

Reflective practice is more than thinking about the nuts and bolts of teaching, it involves evaluating the _processes_ of teaching and learning, and questioning _why_ we do something rather than _how_. Importantly it involves learning from this process and initiating change when and where required. This is an iterative process with infinitely connected lines and loops.

In this Guide we wish to challenge you to become a critically reflective teacher. This involves sitting back and reflecting upon your own teaching and personal assumptions against your experiences and knowledge of educational theory and pedagogy. So it involves you also being a critically reflective learner. It also involves teaching students to become critically reflective. The process of comparison involved in critical reflection should be able to highlight any differences between theory and practice, and thereby signal points of re-adjustment and open up avenues for transformative educational change and lifelong learning.

The challenge presented by turning back onto ourselves in order to effect change and facilitate deeper approaches to learning and teaching need not be an onerous one. But it does insist that we carefully consider our various effects upon the learning and teaching context, and our responsibilities to learners, university life and society.

_The student perspective_

Ramsden (2003) suggests that, "good teachers are always evaluating themselves" and further that
the lessons learned about effective teaching from an examination of how students perceive it should be applied to the process of evaluating and improving instruction….there is an exact parallel between (the satisfactory methods widely used for) measuring teaching quality and unsatisfactory ways of assessing students. (Ramsden, 2003: 219)

This brings to the fore an essential question: *What has been the effect of my teaching on the quality of my students' learning?*

Critically reflective teachers are always thinking about how they influence and effect the learning and teaching environment, and importantly upon the likely effects of their teaching and presence upon the quality of their students' learning. A critically reflective educator will ‘frame’ their reflections from a student perspective and will embark upon a deliberate process of gathering information and evidence, and finding out how students are experiencing learning and teaching. Both evaluation and reflection are more productive when reinforced by evidence.

Thinking about learning from the students’ perspective requires us to:

- appreciate how students perceive our intentions as teachers and assessors
- understand the institution’s intentions towards us in terms of evaluation
- design and use methods of assessment that will contribute to deeper student learning
- choose evaluation methods which contribute to the development and improvement of learning and teaching

**Facilitating student reflection in group work**

Some people are better reflectors than others and neither staff nor students possess innate skills to reflect. Many people when asked to reflect will simply describe what has happened, others will delve deeply into their own feelings and responses to given contexts thus engaging in more critical forms of reflection. There are also issues related to language ability, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status which may enhance or limit a persons reflective ability, desire or confidence to reflect.

Although we would like to assume that all staff and students can or do reflect critically, regularly, and effectively upon their learning and teaching contexts their ability to do so will vary greatly. We should not expect all students to be able to reflect when asked to do it, nor will they all be able to do it in the ways that we would like them to. Many will enter with limited skills and abilities and will require guidance to become a good reflector, just as some of us may require additional guidance on reflective practices. Teaching students how to reflect is consistently neglected in theoretical literature on reflection because it assumes that we all know how to reflect. Below we offer many resources and additional readings in order to further develop reflection skills, as well as some ideas for helping students to reflect, and a list of learning, teaching and assessment methods commonly used to facilitate student reflection.

**Tips on starting to reflect**
If you desire to either more effectively or consciously reflect upon your own teaching practices and contexts OR wish to provide learning and teaching and/or assessment opportunities that require students to reflect upon their own learning or professional experiences and contexts, then you should:

- consider your own ideas, beliefs, and values about reflection, as well as your current level of reflective skills and abilities
- avoid assuming that everyone knows what reflection is or how to do it
- research, gather information, appreciate and understand the diverse definitions, purposes, practices, processes and desired outcomes of reflection in the learning and teaching contexts (for both teachers and learners, and others such as employers, peers, managers)
- develop a clear picture of how reflection can enable you to continuously monitor and evaluate your teaching, and your learning and teaching environment
- commit to an ongoing and strategic process of personal and professional reflection, and do it! (use formal and informal methods)
- clearly explain the what, why and how of reflection to students
- facilitate teaching and classroom procedures and practices which allow students to learn how to develop skills in order to become reflective (practice, practice, practice!)
- regularly reflect upon your own work, teaching styles and methods, assumptions about students, the learning process (and the like)
- reflect upon and evaluate the effectiveness of your reflection and evaluation schedules, methods, and purposes

Basically, if you would like to develop more reflective skills in yourself or your students, then you will have to learn to, teach students to, and then practice, practice, practice!

Questions to ask yourself in order to guide reflection

The reflective teacher develops many questions to choose from to serve as objects of reflection. Such as …

- **What** is it about my work and the learning and teaching context that I want to know about?
- **How** do I find out about these things?
- **Who** will I ask about these things?

Critical reflection: learning and teaching practices/methods

The literature on reflection is extensive with many authors defining, explaining, using and advocating a diverse range of constructivist approaches that appear to have the worthwhile intention of drawing theory into practice (Donaghy and Morss, 2000; Fisher, 2003; Hankes, 1996; Jones, 2004; McCollum, 2002; Moore, 2004; Price, 2004; Rodgers, 2002; Spalding and Wilson, 2002). There is an assumption within the literature that there are different levels of reflection and different learning and teaching practices that may develop deeper understanding. The table below highlights a variety of quite specific reflective strategies and methods expressed in the literature. From their different disciplines and contexts, the authors of this work discuss the use of reflection either to engage their students in deeper learning or to cultivate their capacity as enabled, self
aware practitioners in their professions (see also Fisher, 2003; Gay and Kirkland, 2003; Jones, 2004; Larrivee, 2000; Spalding and Wilson, 2002; Vavrus, 2002).

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<td>ended, focussed, supported)</td>
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**Talking**  
Role simulations  
Debates  
Discussion (understandings and practices)

**Peer/work**  
Peer coaching/mentoring  
Peer observation and feedback  
Work based learning  
Systematic observation

**Self (student/teacher)**  
Auto-ethnography  
Self assessment, Self reflection  
Reflecting aloud  
Self disclosure, confession  
Making time to reflect

**ADDITIONAL READING**

**Reflection and critical reflection**

Particularly concise and useful starting texts for developing critical reflection in Higher Education are marked with an asterisk *


Smith & Hatton

Methods of practicing and/or teaching how to reflect


Methods for facilitating student reflection processes


