

Reflection

Aims of leaflet

This leaflet aims to help you think about what is involved in reflection, and how to use it more effectively to improve the way you think about and make progress in your studying. It will also give you some ideas for developing reflective habits and skills.

Contents

- **Introduction**
- **What is reflection?**
- **Developing the habit of reflection**
- **Reflective Learning Journals**
- **Useful frameworks for reflection**
- **Reflection in your coursework**
- **Closing comments**

Reflection



Reflection is an everyday process. We reflect on a range of everyday problems and situations all the time, on a basic level – ‘What went well? What didn’t? Why? How do I feel about it?’ We don’t usually have a fixed format for this, it just happens. Feelings, thoughts and emotions are allowed to gradually ‘surface’. We might choose to do something differently, or not, as a result of reflecting, but reflection is essentially a kind of loose processing of thoughts and feelings about an incident, a meeting, a day – any event or experience at all.

Reflection can be an automatic or unconscious process. For most of us, reflection is likely to be what happens when we have had time to stand back from something, as in: ‘On reflection, I think you might be right’, or ‘On second thoughts, I realised he was more upset than me.’

Question-based reflection

If we deliberately reflect, maybe as part of our work or family role, there tends to be a rough process of ‘How did it go? What went well? Why? What didn’t? Why? What next?’ Examples might be of a football coach reflecting after a match, a teacher reflecting on a lesson, or simply a parent thinking about how best to deal with a teenager. In this kind of reflection, the aim is to review progress, in order to improve, or change something for next time.

What is reflection? Key elements

Reflection is a type of thinking associated with deep thought, aimed at achieving better understanding. It contains a mixture of elements, such as:

1. Making sense of experience

We don't always learn from experiences. Reflection is where we analyse experience, actively attempting to 'make sense' or find the meaning in it.

2. 'Standing back'

It can be hard to reflect when we are caught up in an activity. 'Standing back' gives a better view or perspective on an experience, issue or action.

3. Repetition

Reflection involves 'going over' something, often several times, in order to get a broad view and check nothing is missed

4. Deeper honesty

Reflection is associated with 'striving after truth'. Through reflection, we can acknowledge things that we find difficult to admit in the normal course of events.

5. 'Weighing up'

Reflection involves being even-handed, or balanced in judgement. This means taking everything into account, not just the most obvious.

6. Clarity

Reflection can bring greater clarity, like seeing events reflected in a mirror. This can help at any stage of planning, carrying out and reviewing activities.

7. Understanding

Reflection is about learning and understanding on a deeper level. This includes gaining valuable insights that cannot be just 'taught'.

8. Making judgements

Reflection involves an element of drawing conclusions in order to move on, change or develop an approach, strategy or activity.

Developing the habit of reflection

The more we reflect consciously, and make time to do it, the more reflection can become a useful habit that guides and informs what we do next. You will improve your performance as a student if you regularly make time to reflect on how your learning is going.

General things to consider might be:

- Your motivation, in general or about a specific task
- How well your study strategies are working
- Which skills you need for a particular task
- Any difficulties - and anything that went well
- Any gaps in your knowledge or skills
- How to tackle a task, break down the steps
- Simply how did it go today? How do I feel about it?

Tips and Ideas

Little and often

Reflect in short bursts, on the bus, in the bath...a few minutes a day really makes a difference. Little and often is best.

Have a focus

Choose one small thing to think about, not 'everything'.

Think of your feelings

Reflect on your emotional as well as intellectual response to an event. This helps you to make any change 'feel right' as well.

Aim to improve

Choose something that was difficult in the day – think through and plan one thing to do differently next time.

Focus on yourself

Focus on your role, rather than getting annoyed with someone else. Plan how to manage something differently.

Find the right questions Ask yourself useful questions that get under the surface – not just what happened, but why? Why did I do that? What would make a difference? What shall I try changing?

Reflective Learning Journals

Why keep a journal?

Unlike the rest of your academic work, a journal is not judged by anyone – you write for yourself, and the process of writing helps you clarify your thoughts and feelings, and work out strategies

What do you write?

Anything you are thinking and feeling at a particular time, related to your studies

- Your feelings about the course, tutors, progress
- Challenges and difficulties
- The way you tackle things – your strategies
- Things you find out about yourself
- Thoughts about how you learn best
- Ideas arising from your studies
- How different areas of your studies link up
- How your studies relate to real life
- Questions, observations, things that stick in your head

How is it useful?

Writing just for yourself means you can write freely – thoughts and feelings come out in a relaxed, informal way. You can make jumps and explore odd connections between thoughts. This is a creative process that helps you to form and develop ideas.

Writing regularly in a journal helps you develop and experiment with your own writing style. Putting ideas into words is a crucial academic writing skill – it takes time to develop a style you feel comfortable with, and a journal is a good place to take some risks and try out different ‘voices’. You don’t have to write a lot at once, but it does help to write a little quite often – every day is ideal.

It really helps confidence to look back over a journal and see progress, how you have dealt with difficulties, and how your ideas have moved on.

It’s also useful to have a note of issues, queries and concerns you might want to raise with a tutor or other students.

Helps you plan next steps – and is a record for checking back

<p align="center">Sample framework for reflective questioning</p> <p align="center">You could adapt this to a module or course to suit your needs</p>

<p>1a Generally, how well am I doing in this unit?</p>	<p>1b On what am I basing this evaluation? My marks? Tutor feedback? Other ways?</p>
<p>2a In this unit, I'm best at:</p> <p>What makes me better at these aspects?</p>	<p>2b How do I know what I am best at?</p>
<p>3a To do better in this unit , I need to improve:</p> <p>What stops me doing as well as I could?</p>	<p>3b How will I bring about an improvement? What are the first steps?</p> <p>Timescale for improvement:</p>
<p>4a What have I learnt, or improved, already since starting this unit?</p>	<p>4b How do I know this? How do I measure what I've learnt? How long it takes? My level of confidence? My understanding? My level of enjoyment?</p>

<p align="center">It can help to use a grid like this from time to time, as a record of progress, and to help you plan what to do next</p>

Reflection, as described in this leaflet, is not something that comes easily to everyone. However, there are lots of different strategies and ways of developing the process that you can adopt. Reflective abilities and habits develop over time and with practice.

Things to remember:

- Build on the way you reflect already. Try becoming more aware of how, when and why you reflect on things.
- Put time aside to reflect, even if only a few minutes, on a regular basis
- Try using a structured approach. Use some of the ideas and the framework in the leaflet as a starting point for developing your own methods
- If you keep your own 'reflective journal', read over them on a regular basis – look for themes
- Consider how far you are reaching any short-term goals you set yourself as part of reflecting
- Find approaches that suit you and your course
- Look for changes in yourself, your actions, attitudes, confidence
- Notice and celebrate your achievements, especially small ones
- Be positive about the process: it takes time for progress to be made, but you will see the benefits of reflection over time

This leaflet was adapted from two useful books, both available to use in the Student Learning Centre:

Cottrell, Stella (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 2nd edn
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

Cottrell, Stella (2003) *Skills for Success* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)

Reflection in your coursework

On many courses, you can be set a '**reflective**' task, or be asked to keep a reflective journal. You may be asked to give a 'reflective analysis', or to 'critically reflect' on something. 'Reflect' here really means to think about and the critical or analytical part ensures that you look at all the issues and draw out the 'positives' and negatives'. A reflection is not asking you to come up with firm conclusions, but to ask questions and consider all the aspects of a topic.

The kind of reflection we might do as a habit can be fairly 'free-floating', allowing all kinds of thoughts and ideas about a topic to surface. It can be useful to have a more structured approach to reflection when it is to be assessed. This type of approach also ensures that you cover as many aspects of a topic as you need.

A useful way to structure a reflection is by coming up with some '**reflective questions**' designed to help you explore a topic in appropriate depth.

These questions should be suited to the task – and with practice you will expand on or refine these. Here are some examples of useful 'reflective questions' related to particular subject assignments:

1. Reflective account/journal of a placement (health-related course)

The aim of this would generally be to help you identify positive and negative aspects of your performance, and plan ways to build on or improve these in the future.

It can be useful to think of this reflection in stages:

- **Description** – what happened? What was the context?
- **Analysis** – what went OK? Why? What wasn't good? Why? How did I feel about it? Why did I do what I did?
- **Theory** – what needs to be done differently? Why?
- **Action** – what to do next? How? What first?

2. Reflective journal for assessment, to include accounts of drama productions (drama-related course)

The aim is really to develop your **critical skills**.

The important thing here is not to describe or tell the story of a play, but to identify strengths and weaknesses in a production, and examine them.

Reflective questions to get you started might be:

How did I feel about this? Excited? Bored? Did it work? Why?

Examine and analyse your own reactions.

More detailed reflection can focus on particular aspects that concern or strike you, such as:

Staging, lighting, sound, design –

- How did each strike you?
- What was good? What worked? Why?
- What didn't work? Why?
- What was being aimed at? Themes/ideas expressed?
- Did the staging reflect these? How?
- What could be done differently?

Ask similar questions re: the performances, style of acting, pace, blocking. By working through these in a reflective way, you will build up a detailed 'reflective analysis' – but it is very important to decide at the start how much detail you think is required, or whether you would rather focus on a few aspects that really stand out.

Key points:

With any reflective coursework, always check:

- **Any guidelines, advice or formats** in your course handbook, or recommended by your tutors
- **The aim of the exercise** – this will determine the kinds of questions and approach to adopt
- **That you have a structure for your reflection** – topics or issues to explore, and questions to use to explore them