

What is Reflection?

“Reflection is an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or assumption, their origins, and their unintended effect^[i]”

In other words, reflection in your course is an exercise where students can critically examine a concrete experience. Through this examination, the students confront and challenge their assumptions, beliefs, and thought patterns and connect their experiences to the theories covered in the course.

Scholars define reflection in various ways, but all definitions have the following common elements: ^[ii]

- students are actively engaged,
- the reflections are generated through a concrete experience,
- students explore their beliefs and assumptions,
- and the reflection activity contributes to new knowledge.

How it works

Through reflective activities, students are encouraged to analyze their actions and the material they are learning. One model to conceptualize this is the “What? So What? Now What?” framework. As students go through an experience, they are first encouraged to define that experience (“What?”). They are then challenged to illustrate the significance of the activity with respect to course material, personal experiences, or professional practice (“So What?”). Finally, based on the significance of the activity, they must plan next steps (“Now What?”). These three questions form a cycle that can facilitate ongoing reflection.

Benefits of Reflection

- facilitates the connection between theory and practical experience^[iii]
- contributes to perception and behaviour transformation^[iv]
- promotes conscious action and self-awareness ^[v]
- fosters problem solving, professional development, and lifelong learning^[vi]
- contributes to deeper understanding of issues^[vii]

Reflection Activities

The activities listed here are designed to be done during your class time, and have been organized from shortest and simplest to longest and most complex. While these activities can be done in isolation, they are most effective when combined with a follow-up assignment. Many of these are based on ideas from Stuart Watson of the Northwest Service Academy [\[viii\]](#)

In-Class: 1 to 5 Minute Activities:

These are activities that can be used to prime students for critical reflection.

Discussion Question: Individuals in the lecture respond to a question posed by the course director. Questions can be answered individually, in groups or online.

Words: Individually or in groups, the students share one to three words that represent their experience.

In-Class: 5 to 30 Minute Activities:

Current Literature: Have student read a current piece of literature (scholarly article, newspaper, blog) and relate it to their experience.

Letter: Students compose a letter to themselves containing their assumptions, beliefs, and values before the experience. They submit it to the course director, who hands it back to them after the experience. Students comment on any changes they observe.

Wall Writings: A large piece of paper(s) are placed on the walls of the classroom and students write about their experience. They then circulate to view and comment on what others have written.

In-Class: 30 Minute to Two-hour Activities:

Timeline: Students create a timeline documenting their concrete experience with all significant events and explanations. Students compare their timeline with others in their group to form a group timeline.

Life Experiences: After being presented with a dilemma, students are asked to use their personal experiences to take a stance on the issue. Students must explicitly relate past experiences with their stance.

Artistic Creation: Students create a skit, poem, collage or other artistic representation of their experience.

Interviews: Students work in groups to interview each other about their experiences using questions provided by the course director. Students record their summarized responses.

Reflection Assignments

Explained here are several types of assignments that are commonly used to facilitate reflection. With the exception of the first, these are completed outside of class time.

In-Class Discussions/Debates

Suitable for smaller courses, in-class discussions can be an excellent tool for facilitating critical reflection around a topic or issue. While not an assignment in itself, it serves as the foundation for the other assignments listed here. The focus of the conversation might be an experience the students shared, an ethical dilemma presented to them, or even an abstract concept they have been given. Following the discussion, you can assign them any number of follow-up activities to help your students think more deeply about their experience.

As a facilitator, your role is to keep the discussion moving and provide ideas to spark conversation. As an instructor, you can evaluate students' participation based on the amount and/or quality of their contributions.

Journals

Journal writing is the most widely used reflection method in higher education, and it can be used throughout the learning experience, rather than prior to or post experience.^[ix] It can be used as a mechanism to ameliorate learning experience by linking theory and concrete experience^[x].

Journal writing can be^[xi]:

- Either structured paper journal or unstructured blogging online
- Either minimal reflection/analysis with vital literature evidence or limited evidence with high reflective aspect
- utilized prior, during or post the learner's experience
- used to aid learners to scrutinize their principles, values, presumptions and experiences
- used as an opportunity to allow students to connect their experiences with their academic experiences as well as future employment, rather than simply stating facts

On-line Discussion Forum Contributions

It is a common practice to ask students to make a minimum weekly contribution to an online discussion forum on class topics or concrete experiences. This allows you to gauge participation and understanding, but it also carries numerous benefits for the students, including:

- Students share insights with their peers
- Increases student involvement in course
- Facilitates group problem solving
- Can be used for self and group evaluation

It allows the students to easily provide feedback to the course director and/or community partner (if applicable)

Levels of Reflection

Level and Scoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explanation of Level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of Assignment
Habitual action <i>Grade: D</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students offer answers without attempting to understand them Automatic response, little conscious thought Students exemplify this level when they follow the steps in a lab manual without any consideration of what they are doing or why No reflective activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> student has completed an assignment without significant thoughts (limited or no conscious) simple interpretation no evidence of concept or theory comprehension student has not connected class context (theories and concepts) with experiences and literature superficial work has been produced
Understanding <i>Grade: C</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of knowledge without appraisal In this case, there is an attempt to understand the topic or concept. Students learn concepts but they don't relate that to their lives and do not have personal reactions to them Theories are understood but remain on an abstract level Knows the "what" but not the "how" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> comprehension of class concepts is evident only class material or theories are discussed student has not made a clear connection between practical or personal experience with theories; no reflection
Reflection <i>Grade: B</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students understand the material, and relate that understanding to their personal experiences and/or practical applications Through this process students gain personal insights beyond the material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> clear connection between theoretical context and experience(s) higher levels of discussion of the relationship between concrete experiences and class content greater insight overall; goes beyond understanding of the class material Evidence of application of theory
Critical reflection <i>Grade: A</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At this stage, the student has a transformative experience Through reflection students reveal underlying beliefs and assumptions, question them, and are able to form new perspectives. This type of reflection occurs gradually over time, and usually involves a disruption of a belief system of the student, necessitating its examination and eventual re-construction. Critical self-reflection can foster self understanding that can facilitate the modification of one's situations (Fisher, 2003) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> superior level of reflection prior presumptions have been recognized and critically examined student demonstrates perspective transformation about a particular issue, problem or concept Work demonstrates higher levels of consciousness

