Teaching critical reflection

At-a-glance

The skills of critical thinking and critical self-reflection are essential for the development of deep thinking citizens in any society. The challenge for students is to understand what is required of them when asked to reflect critically. This document may help you develop those skills in your students.

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How do we define reflection?

The root of the word 'reflection' is the Latin *reflectere*. *Flectere* means 'to bend', so re-flectere increases the inflection—'to bend back'. This means reviewing our inner processes of thinking and feeling. John Dewey, a key originator of thinking about reflection sees it as a special form of problem solving, which requires qualities of open-mindedness, responsibility and self-awareness. Schön emphasises the concept of 'reflection-in-action', where the reflective practitioner evaluates intuitive understandings intrinsic to experience as a guide to action. This 'on-the-spot' processing is different from retrospective contemplation, which typifies most reflection on learning.

Some teachers find it useful to differentiate types or levels of reflection, each representing progressively deeper levels of self-awareness:

1. the **technical or evaluative level** – students typically start at the first level, mostly *describing and evaluating their experiences*, with little connection to theory
2. the **practical or sense-making level** – most progress to the second level, *making sense of their experiences or learning* in the light of theoretical understandings
3. the critical level – students tend to find the third level the most challenging, as it requires a capacity to *critically examine the values, beliefs and assumptions* underlying their actions.

We may ask students to 'critically analyse' or 'critically reflect' without clearly defining these terms. Critical analysis usually requires taking a position on theory or literature, external to individual experience. Students may make reference to their own experience as part of drawing conclusions, without necessarily being critically self-reflective.

The term 'critical self-reflection' makes it clear what we expect of students:

> Critical self-reflection involves questioning assumptions underlying one's beliefs and values, reassessing those assumptions, exploring alternative perspectives and acting on new understandings.

Values, beliefs and assumptions

Value	Beliefs	Assumptions
Reflect what we think is good, right, desirable, worthwhile, and how we believe the world should be; provide the foundation for making personal and professional judgments; principles we live by; can be difficult to change	Positions we hold that represent how we think the world operates, what we think is 'true'; strongly connected to values; more likely to change when they are demonstrated to be false through convincing evidence	Presuppositions that form the basis for how we act in the world; the unstated, taken-for-granted ideas we carry around unconsciously; difficult to identify unless they are challenged
Key question: *What is important to me?*	Key question: *What do I think is true?*	Key question: *What do I take for granted?*

Strategies that support students to become critically self reflective

Strategy	Details	What you can do
Develop critical friend partnerships	Develop relationships with people who are willing to give and receive constructive feedback, especially questioning unaware assumptions. Such relationships can be very effective between people with different belief and value systems and different backgrounds. Giving feedback sensitively and asking open questions are important skills.	1. Assist students to form critical friend relationships 2. Model critical questioning 3. Model how to give and receive constructive feedback
Teach how to pose critical questions	Learning the skills of asking questions that elicit critically reflective responses is important. Examples include: *What aspects of your background and knowledge have influenced your choice to study to be a …?* *What values underpin your approach?* *What beliefs do you hold about your chosen profession?* *Think of another student you know who has different values – how does their approach differ from yours?*	1. Model your answers 2. Explain the differences between values, beliefs and assumptions 3. Encourage students to come up with their own questions
Scaffold steps in reflective practice	1. **Description:** *What happened?* 2. **Personal experience:** *What was I thinking and feeling?* 3. **Evaluation:** *What was good and bad about the experience?* 4. **Analysis:** *What sense can I make from the experience? What have I learned? How does my experience connect with theory?* 5. **Confrontation:** *What values, beliefs and assumptions did I carry into this experience? Where did they come from? How do they differ from the values, beliefs and assumptions of others involved in the experience? What are the ethical implications of my actions?* 6. **Reconstruction:** *What could I do differently next time?*	1. Use this model for students on practicum or doing field work 2. Adapt the model to suit the context 3. Add your own questions 4. Give regular, formative feedback 5. Keep asking more questions, especially if students continue to describe rather than self-reflect 6. Model typical answers
Encourage regular reflective journal writing	Learning through reflection is ultimately an individual process. The reflective journal is one strategy that is helpful in developing skills in self-reflection. Journals are often a requirement for assessment as part of practicum. It is important that the *contents* of students' personal reflections are not graded. However, giving feedback on their reflective writing *skills* is important for developing students' reflective capacity.	1. Encourage students to respond to critical questions, as above 2. Distinguish between descriptive and reflective writing 3. Give regular formative feedback

Staff may be interested to see advice to students on reflective writing at http://www.scu.edu.au/

Sources

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