

Guidance on writing about your reflection

Reflective writing

Much is written about reflection but little if anything describes what it is, which makes the act of reflection difficult to perform. This guidance is not a prescription but aims to help you understand some of the elements of reflection, the context to which it is applied and finally the interim outcomes that can be expected. Together this will provide a framework for reflection. Reflective writing is the translation of one's critical reflection into narrative.

What is critical reflection?

Is it possible to reflect about anything? Simply yes, however, reflection that brings about sustained change in new insights is generally placed within a particular context. Reflection is driven by an issue, problem, conflict or a perplexing situation or dilemma. This encourages the probing of self-questioning to explore, experiment and rehearse the issue subject to the reflective act.

Reflection is a state of mind that may take some time to develop and master. It is a form of 'mindfulness', which is conscious exclusion of other elements of life that may distract your contemplation and lead to confusion rather than clarity.

The need to create certainty

Students wish for certainty because of their high anxiety in being assessed – "just tell me what I need to know and I will reproduce it". Reflection goes against this as it takes the mind to an uncertain place, which may be strange or even scary for some. The state of mindfulness challenges the held assumptions that certainty assures and creates a climate of uncertainty where anything is possible. It allows you to think and explore more creatively tapping into intellectual potential often ignored. It is this state where the process of reflection flourishes.

Let's practice reflection – an exercise

There is no prescription to be offered 'to do' reflection as it an experiential journey of enquiry. Think of something that perturbs you. Spontaneously write down all the words that come into your head however seemingly irrelevant. Examine your words and develop links and themes that emerge. What does it tell you? What are your thoughts, feelings and beliefs associated with these themes? Write them down. Step back and contemplate your writing. Sometimes you may need to do this physically either moving into a different room or space conducive to your state of mindfulness. In essence reflect on your reflection (thinking about how you are thinking) identifying what new insights emerge. What have you learnt? Write it down however seemingly irrelevant.

You may not understand today but tomorrow may provide new revelations. Using your new-found wisdom you are now able to provide explanations, meaning and understanding of phenomena that was previously obscured. This is called transformation, which basically means you are no longer the same: something has changed. It is this change that demonstrates to the assessor progress in reflective thinking, which will reward you with better grades in your assignments.

The outcome of reflection

In essence by reflecting on your practice and recording it within reflective writing you will be able to answer those difficult questions that so often elude us.

- What you know but don't know you know
- What you do not know but want to know
- What you think, feel, believe, value, understand about your role and boundaries
- How your actions match up with your beliefs
- How to value and take into account personal feelings, in relation to your own learning and professional development.

This form of reflection seems to enable practitioners to explore and experiment with areas of experience otherwise difficult to access. (Bolton 2010).

Recommended reading

Bolton, G (2010) Reflective practice: writing and professional development. London: Sage.

Gould, N & Baldwin, M (2004) Social work, critical reflection and the learning organisation. Ashgate: Aldershot. Particularly chapter 6 Sustaining reflective practice in the workshop.

Knott, C & Scragg, T (2010) Reflective practice in social work. Learning matters: Exeter.

Kember D (2001) Reflective teaching & learning in the health professions. Blackwell science: London.