

Reflective Writing - some initial guidance

What is Reflective Writing?

We will start from what reflective writing is not. It is not:

- *conveyance of straight forward information in a report, essay or 'recipe';
- *straight-forward description, though there may be descriptive elements;
- *a straight-forward decision e.g. about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad
- *simple problem solving like recalling how to get to the nearest station.

In the context of your higher education programme, reflective writing will usually have a purpose (e.g. you will be writing reflectively about something that you have to do or have done).

It will usually involve the sorting out of bits of knowledge, ideas, feelings, awareness of how you are behaving and so on. It could be seen as a melting pot into which you put a number of thoughts, feelings, other forms of awareness, and perhaps new information.

In the process of sorting it out in your head, and representing the sortings out on paper or electronically, you may either recognise that you have learnt something new or that you need to reflect more with, perhaps further input. Your reflections need to come to some sort of end point, even if that is a statement of what you need to consider next. *It is also worth recognising that reflective writing may be a means of becoming clearer about something.*

From what has been said above, it will be obvious that reflection is not a straight-forward and 'tidy' process itself. When you have to represent the process for someone else to read, you will inevitably tidy it up - but if a tutor is expecting reflective writing, s/he will not be looking for a dry 'single-track' account, or just a conclusion.

Let us assume that you are reflecting on a presentation that you have just done in class. We said, above, that reflective writing is not a 'straight-forward' description. You will probably have to describe what you are about to reflect on and perhaps relate it to the purpose for which you are reflecting. But reflection is more than that. You might want to evaluate your performance in the presentation, for example. This may be represented by you questioning yourself, perhaps challenging yourself. You may consider your reactions, and even the manner in which you have initially viewed the situation and written about it. Your writing may recognise that others may have different views of the same event. So with regard to the presentation, you might think about the performances of others - and so on.

The quality of reflective writing

It is worth thinking of the quality of reflective writing as being on a continuum from rather superficial writings that are largely descriptive, to much deeper writings in which the questioning is more profound. Neither is necessarily right or wrong - they are just different. Reflective writing will need be 'pitched' according to the purpose for which the task is done.

Useful questions for prompting reflective writing

These questions are 'prompts' that may help you to start writing reflectively. There is no sense in which they are all to be addressed. They are there to help if you need them. Beyond going from fairly superficial and descriptive issues towards those that will encourage a more profound approach, there is no significance in their sequence. You pick what is helpful to you at the time. You may find that these questions are useful to you at the start of writing reflectively and then later you will not need them.

We start with pure description that is not reflective at all - but sets the scene for the reflective writing.

Description:

What is the issue / event / topic / plan / project / task / period of time etc that is to be the subject matter of the reflection?

Questions to facilitate reflection

Out of the description, what is the issue / are the issues that could be addressed in reflective writing? These issues can be raised within the description or separately. They are like bits of Velcro to which you can attach the reflective writing.

- *What do you need to consider at the moment in terms of the broader context of the issue?
- *What is the nature of the significance of this issue to you (?and why)?
- *How do you feel about it?
- *How do your feelings relate to any action?
- *Was it good / bad - and what are the implications?
- *What do you need to do?
- *What other information do you need (ideas, knowledge, opinion etc)?
- *Are there previous instances of this event, issue arising that will help you to think more/ differently about it?
- *Are there others, or the views of others who are relevant to this matter - and in what way?

Questions that are likely to be helpful in prompting more profound reflection

- *Has the nature of your description of the issue / event (etc) influenced the manner in which you have gone about the reflective writing?
- *Is there relevant formal theory?
- *How do motives for and context of the reflective writing affect the manner in which you have gone about the task?
- *Is there another point of view that you could explore - are there alternative interpretations to consider?
- *Are others seeing this issue from different points of view that may be helpful to you to explore?
- *Does this issue relate to other contexts - reflection on which may be helpful?
- *If you 'step back' from this issue, does it look different?
- *How do you judge your ability to reflect on this matter?
- *Do you notice that your feelings about it have changed over time - or in the course of writing this - suggesting that your own frame of reference has changed?
- *Are there ethical / moral / wider social issues that you would want to explore?

Moon, J (1999) **Reflection in Learning and Professional Development**, Kogan Page, London