Chapter 3

Reflective Writing: Principles and Practice

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Introduction

This article presents the theories and principles that inform the practice of reflective writing in portfolios used in the development of higher education professionals. There are many definitions of reflection and reflective writing available. Put simply, *reflection* involves individual teachers in thinking about and critically analysing their learning and teaching experiences. Reflection of this kind is intentional and usually directed towards enhanced understanding of and continual improvement in learning and teaching practice. Such reflection is often guided by learning and teaching theory, as well as by the experiences of and feedback from peers and students. When teachers turn their reflection into reflective writing, they commit themselves to paper or screen, drafting and crafting accounts of learning and teaching experiences and subsequent analysis of these. In other words, reflective writing is characterised by a narrative framework that transforms it from mere description into a personally and publicly meaningful account of messy and multifaceted experience.

This chapter explains why such an activity might be important in the context of contemporary higher education. This is followed by an overview of key thinkers and theories in the area of reflection and reflective writing. The chapter concludes with some guidelines for reflective writing and a methodology for its assessment. These are likely to be useful both to academic developers and also to academics who wish to know more about reflective practice.

Why Reflective Writing?

Reflection and reflective writing have become important, even necessary, in higher education for several reasons, which are outlined below.

Adaptive Response to Change

Reflective writing is an adaptive strategy that can be used to respond to contemporary changes in the culture, conditions and practice of third-level education. Reflective practice and writing facilitate the formation of a set of concepts—a type of 'mental furniture' (Carlile 2005)—that can be moved around and rearranged to suit the appropriate context.

Professional Expertise

High-status professions such as medicine and law claim clearly articulated bodies of knowledge and expertise. As Eraut (1994) argues, such claims underpin their intellectual and cultural status. Reflective writing helps higher education practitioners to articulate their professional expertise as the basis for claiming a comparable area of theory, knowledge and practice.

Academic Discourse, Critical Thinking and Continuing Professional Development

Reflective writing is central to academic discourse and gives rise to several tangible products used in education and training. For example, it can be used:

- in teaching portfolios as evidence of the learning outcomes achieved by an individual and therefore as an assessment tool
- as a personal record of experience and learning and may serve as a meta-cognitive tool
- for continuing professional development purposes as an individual assessment and diagnostic tool
- as a key component of critical thinking, to encourage the clarification of concepts and to indicate the stage of critical thinking at which the student has arrived.

In all these areas, writing acts as a form of thinking and can become a medium through which experience is represented and meaning is acquired for the writer and others.

Reflective writing is important as an intentional act, which suggests that it is both explicit and conscious. From this perspective, it is directed at an end or a goal. It is not simply reactive, but proactive and designed to be manifested in behaviour.

Deep Learning

From a constructivist perspective, the process of reflective writing facilitates deep learning because it makes connections between facets of experience—between cognition and emotion, between past and present experience and between old and new knowledge. It often takes the form of a narrative, through which an individual can attempt to make sense of thoughts and experiences that might otherwise seem unfathomable. Such narratives give writers space to express lack of understanding while still maintaining coherence. For these reasons, the act of writing is inherently associated with learning in higher education. Through the process of reflective writing, learners comes to discover the most favourable conditions—physical and psychological—under which their learning best occurs. Reflective writing also enriches experience and makes it meaningful.

Construction and Dissemination of Shared Meaning

The act of writing transfers private thoughts from the purely subjective into a public domain of shared language and discourse. Knowledge is not an independent entity; it is always created and situated within a particular context by 'communities of practice'—groups of practitioners who share meanings and understandings. In the specific setting of higher education, reflective writing allows for the construction and dissemination of such shared meaning.

Self-empowerment

The act of writing and the use of 'I' also demands ownership of learning, which can ultimately act as a form of self-empowerment. This ownership of learning will lead to a stance and a style leading to the articulation and expression of personal values. As Moon (1999) claims, practice in reflective writing develops personal power and a 'voice' through which this power is communicated.

Reflective Theory

This section surveys the ideas of several thinkers, all of whom suggest reflective methodologies in which reflective writing has an important role.

John Dewey

For John Dewey, reflection involves 'turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration … in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (Dewey 1933, pp. 3, 9). Reflection is a rational process in which an individual begins in a state of perplexity and proceeds through a process of exploration to arrive at a hypothesis that can be verified through experience or imagination. Dewey's writing shows that reflection need not be a purely intuitive activity, but may be undertaken in a systematic fashion. Because reflection can be difficult to implement as a purely cerebral activity, writing provides a vehicle for carrying out Dewey's systematic approach.

Dewey may be criticised for his claim that reflection always starts with a process of disequilibrium, which can be solved in a purely scientific or technical manner. Purely scientific modes of thinking do not mirror the unstructured fashion in which people respond to experience that may not be always amenable to straightforward systematic analysis. Such experiences and responses are often 'messy', unpredictable and inchoate.

Donald Schön

Responding to indeterminate, unpredictable experience is a characteristic of the professional, according to Donald Schön, the leading modern proponent of reflective practice. Professionals exhibit a particular artistry or intelligence in making sense of such experience, as they engage in what Schön calls a 'world making activity' (Schön 1987, p. 36).

In the mid-20th century, a 'technical rational' approach to teaching emanating from the United States claimed that there is a definite body of knowledge and a specific set of techniques for the effective achievement of educational goals (Tyler 1949). According to Schön, however, it cannot be assumed that there is just one authoritative way of knowing. To make meaning of complex experience, Schön states that professionals need to reflect on their own principles and practices (Schön 1983). In higher education, this implies a rejection of the positivistic, 'technical rational' model. Reflection that focuses on the particularities of individual learning and teaching experience and goals can help teachers to adapt general models and guidelines to their own circumstances with the aim of improving understanding and practice.

According to Schön, much of the knowledge possessed by professionals and experts is tacit. That is, the performance of action becomes so smooth and integrated that the performer is unaware of the stages or skills involved. Schön suggests a methodology for reflection, which begins with this 'knowledge in action', 'unpacking' the tacit knowledge and making it explicit. There are two types of reflection—'on' and 'in' action. *Reflection-in-action* is concurrent with action and often involves making tacit assumptions or behaviours explicit so that they can be examined, demystified and shared. The resulting knowledge can then be passed on to novices. *Reflection-on-action* is a retrospective examination of events from a particular perspective. It has the intention of clarifying and learning from experience.

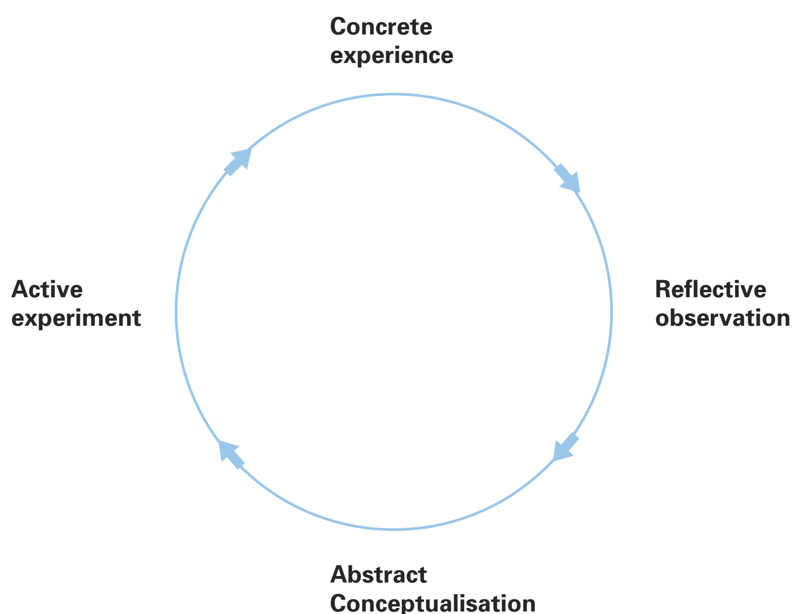
Dialogue may become part of the process of reflection. An interlocutor such as a novice may act as a mediator in the elucidation of meaning by asking questions and by discussion. In the absence of such a mediator, a blank page can take on this function, prompting reflective writing.

The act of writing is important as a mechanism for undertaking reflection. In writing, one 'puts into words' the unstructured thoughts and ideas that form the material for reflection. Once the reflections have been written down, they are available for review by the reflector and wider community.

David Kolb

Reflection does not take place in a vacuum; there is always a 'schema' that organises thinking. Traditionally this schema moves from theory to practice. David Kolb's well-known 'learning cycle' (Kolb 1984; Kolb & Fry 1975; see Figure 1 below) represents a schema that, by contrast, suggests that theory need not precede practice. It is non-linear, a cycle that can begin at any of its nodes, but in which 'concrete experience' is an obvious starting point. Experience is followed by observation and reflection, leading to the formulation of abstract concepts or general rules, which are tested by experimentation, modifying the next experiential cycle.

Figure 1: Kolb's Learning Cycle



According to Kolb, in order to learn, an individual 'grasps' experience physically or emotionally through *apprehension*, or though purely cerebral methods of *comprehension*. Experience is then 'transformed' through experimentation, which Kolb calls *extension*, or through thinking, which he calls *intension*, so that it becomes knowledge. The 'grasping' and 'transforming' depends on the person's existing mindset, which is affected by context and existing norms and assumptions. The two ways of 'grasping' and 'transforming' provide four possible routes from experience to personal knowledge, as shown in Figure 2 below. These routes are not mutually exclusive; several could be travelled simultaneously.

Figure 2: Kolb's Routes from Experience to Knowledge

	Grasping	Transforming	
1. Experience	2a. Feeling Concrete experience *Apprehension*	3a. Action Experimentation *Extension*	4. Knowledge
	2b. Thought Abstract experience *Comprehension*	3b. Thought Reflective observation *Intension*	

In Kolb's theory, the four possible routes develop into different learning styles, which he labels as follows.

Accommodation: 1 → 2a → 3a → 4
Accommodators adapt to immediate circumstances and solve problems by trial and error without worrying too much about analysis. A weakness is a tendency towards impatience.

Assimilation: 1 → 2b → 3b → 4
Assimilators excel at interpreting and making sense of events by means of theoretical or conceptual frameworks. A possible weakness is a tendency to remain at an abstract and inactive level.

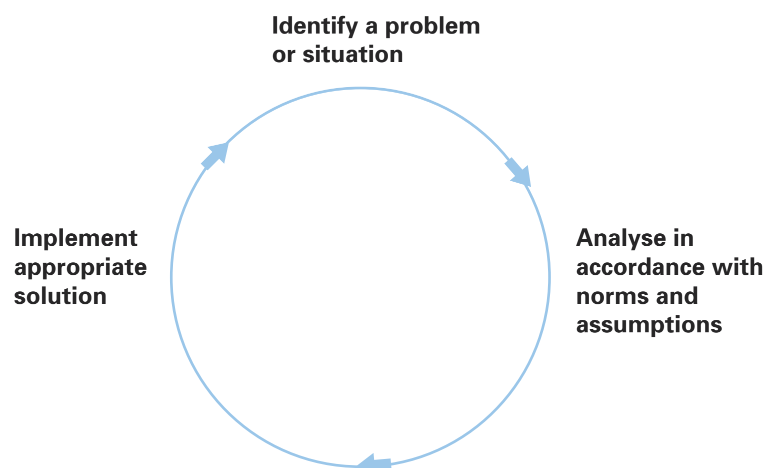
Convergence: 1 → 2b → 3a → 4
Convergers are good at putting ideas into practice and taking decisions logically. A possible weakness is a preference for technical solutions when the issue is in fact a personal one.

Divergence: 1 → 2a → 3b → 4
Divergers have an ability to view situations from different angles and generate many ideas. A possible weakness is the danger of not staying on track because of thought-provoking side issues (Carlile 2005).

Kolb's cycle offers a heuristic by which reflective writing may be structured. The writer can address each of the four stages of the cycle in a systematic fashion. Writers with a preference for one aspect of the cycle could be encouraged to address the other aspects. For example, writers whose preference is for the description of concrete experience could be encouraged to move into writing that is reflective, theoretical and forward-looking.

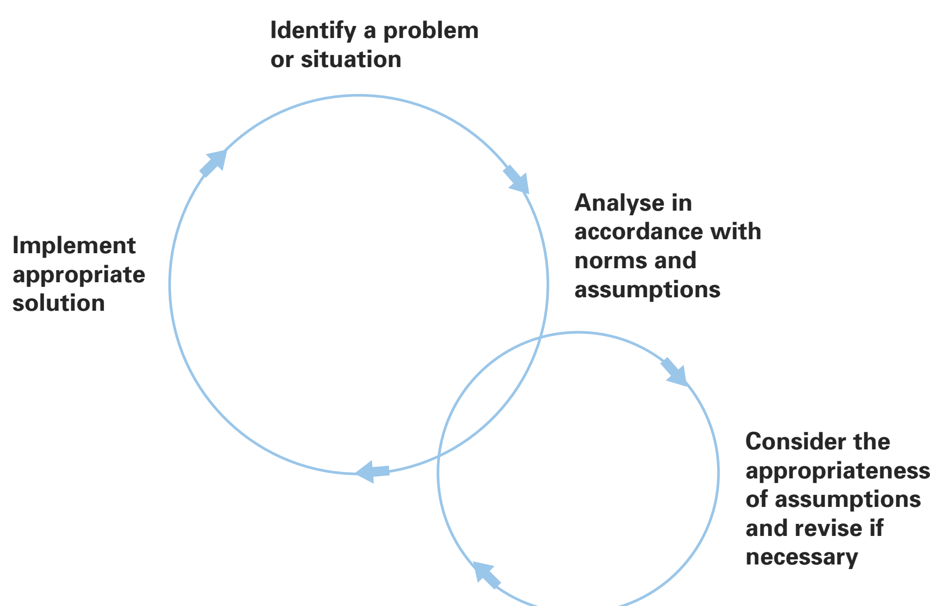
People may complete the Kolb cycle retaining their existing norms and assumptions. In this case, they are involved in *single-loop learning*, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Single-loop Learning



On the other hand, the validity of existing norms and assumptions may be questioned, and may require confirmation or modification. Reflective writing has an important role to play here, because it helps people to articulate their existing assumptions. Once in tangible form, these assumptions can be more easily manipulated, challenged and transformed. The act of writing represents a conscious movement into a second loop, and facilitates *double-loop learning* (see Figure 4 below). The distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning was first drawn by Ashby (1952) but developed and popularised by Argyris and Schön (1974).

Figure 4: Double-loop Learning



Implicit in the theories of Kolb and Schön is the concept of reflecting in order to improve future practice. The second loop envisages the possibility of change through a re-examination of existing assumptions. Once interrogated in reflective writing, these assumptions may be confirmed or challenged, pointing the way towards improved practice. Reflection therefore can be *on* practice, *in* practice and *for* practice.

Teaching Reflection

Reflection may begin mundanely, and focus on only one aspect of experience, such as a descriptive account of a classroom incident. At its highest level, however, reflection will consider experience from many perspectives—the emotional, the rational, the theoretical, the experiential, the moral. For this reason, reflection may be disturbing, but can lead to a heightened consciousness of the situation that can include a sense of personal responsibility and a commitment to action.

Many people find reflective writing difficult. To overcome anxiety and other blocks to reflection and reflective writing, it may be necessary to present reflection as straightforward process, even initially through a type of formula or model. Here we present a model that we hope will be useful to teachers and practitioners of reflection. It draws on theories of meta-cognition and reflection, combined with experience.

Meta-cognitive Theory

When teaching reflective skills, it is first important to raise people's awareness of themselves as learners and thinkers—that is, to encourage them to become aware of their own thinking and learning processes. This is because meta-cognition has been identified as a key aspect of 'deep' learning, as successful learners become conscious of their own learning (Marton & Saljo 1984). Deep learning is important in order to make material meaningful and so facilitate the transfer of learning into long-term memory.

Personal learning styles or preferences in learning may be better understood by means of learning style inventories such as that of Honey and Mumford (1992), which is based on the Kolb cycle and categorises people according to four learning styles. Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences might also be useful in helping people to understand how they learn. He suggests that there are eight different 'intelligences' and that people have varying levels of strength and development across the range. Multiple Intelligences profiles can be established so that people may be aware of their own strengths in different areas (Jordan 2003).

An individual's awareness of personal learning styles and patterns of reflective thinking may open the possibility of different learning styles and alternative perspectives. This awareness may lead to a reiteration and revision of views, as in the theory of double-loop learning, where existing norms and assumptions are challenged—a characteristic of good reflective writing.

Reflective Theory

The seminal theories of reflection discussed earlier have an explicit place in our model for teaching and practising reflection, because they provide learners with theoretical spectacles through which to observe experience. Brookfield (1995), for example, claims that theory is important because it gives us another way to 'name' our experience:

> Theory can help us 'name' our practice by illuminating the general elements of what we think are idiosyncratic experiences. It can provide multiple perspectives on familiar situations. Studying theory can help us realize that what we thought were signs of our personal failings as teachers can actually be interpreted as the inevitable consequences of certain economic, social, and political processes. This stops us falling victim to the belief that we are responsible for everything that happens in the classroom (Brookfield 1995, p. 36).

Reflective Experience

Meta-cognitive theory applies to the person, and reflective theory applies to experience. The next step in teaching reflective skills is combining theory and experience. This has the effect of deepening understanding of the theory by the provision of experiential exemplars. Experience deepens understanding of the theory while the theory enriches experience. In turn, reflection engenders a sensitivity to, and a restructuring of, experience.

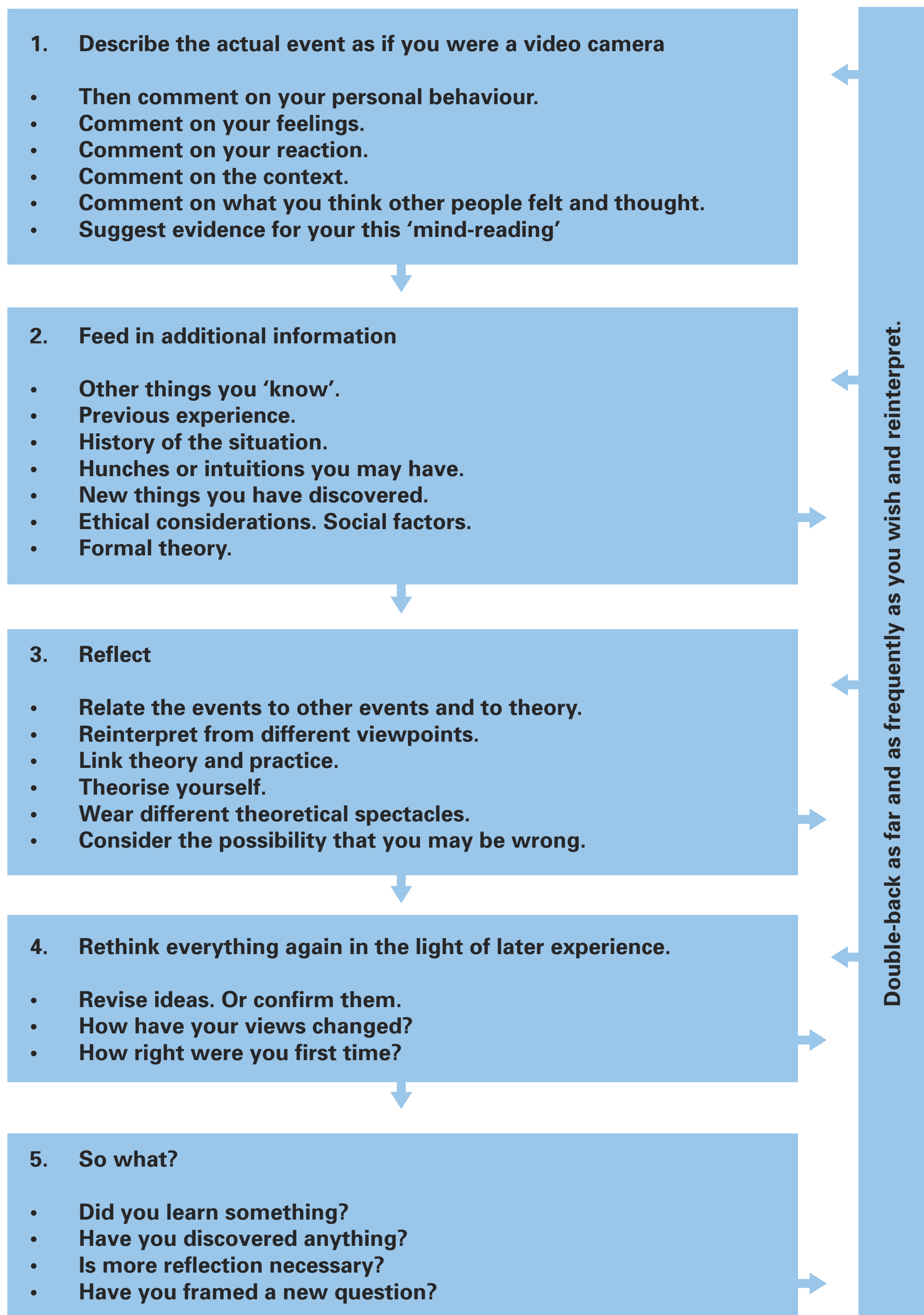
Teaching Reflective Writing

Many, if not most, teaching portfolios require some samples of reflective writing. Many postgraduate certificates and other programmes in higher education learning and teaching also emphasise the importance of reflective writing, often using reflective teaching portfolios as a central aspect of assessment strategy. Academics coming to these reflective writing activities for the first time are likely to need clear guidelines.

We suggest that you begin teaching reflective writing by asking students to write down their initial impressions of an experience. This needs to be as close in time as possible to the event to obtain the actual impression and not a later rationalisation in the light of other events. At a later stage, students can be asked to reconsider the initial impression with their considered reflections. The difference between the two records can provoke an understanding of the reflective processes involved. The 'lived forward' initial impression can be compared with the 'understood backwards' later reflection. As Kierkegaard points out, 'Life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards' (Kierkegaard, ed 1990) p. REF).

Figure 5 offers a model for reflection that breaks these steps down into more detail. It could be used as the basis for an entry in a reflective journal or teaching portfolio. Some individuals might feel that writing to a formula such as this can feel inauthentic, but it can result in genuine reflection if done in good faith.

Figure 5: A Model for Reflection



Reflective Writing Strategies

It is often easiest to begin reflective writing with a critical incident, unresolved issue or problem that demands a response. Although it may not be dispelled by reflection, perplexity will be consciously accepted. According to Baxter Magolda (1992), consciousness of perplexity can represent a high level of epistemological awareness and is often an indicator of reflective writing of a high standard. Nevertheless, beginners sometimes worry that they will suffer from 'reflector's block'—that is, they will not know what to write about. As well as the 'micro' framework for reflection illustrated in Figure 5 above, it is helpful to have a 'macro' framework for each piece of reflective writing. Such frameworks might include:

- expectations: reflections in advance of an event
- impressions: instant thoughts in the moment
- critical incident: reflections that respond to a particularly revealing external event
- learning moment: reflections on a moment of enlightenment, understanding or insight
- problems: reflections that assist in the process of naming difficulties
- regular entries: consistent, methodical journal writing
- double reflection: reconsideration of a previous reflection
- second-order reflection: reflective overview of a sequence of earlier reflections
- meta-reflection: reflections on the process of reflection
- final evaluation: reflections when part of a programme is completed
- group reflection: reflections by a group on a shared experience or case study.

Case Studies

People often find that sharing and comparing reflections with others is an important and useful aspect of developing reflective capability. For personal and practical reasons, however, this can sometimes be very difficult. For example, sensitivity and vulnerability can be significant obstacles to sharing: 'I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have' (Powell 1969, p. 12). Shared reflection therefore needs a very high degree of trust. In addition, it can be practically difficult to compare reflections that relate to different people, different contexts and different events.

The use of case studies offers a means of addressing these personal and practical problems. Case studies of 'critical incidents' in higher education such as those in Schwartz and Webb (1993) allow people to share the experiences of others, and they also promote class debate and group reflection. There is no personal risk so people can contribute freely and everyone in the group has the same shared experience, so reflective approaches can be compared. The teacher too can compare and assess the reflections of group members.

Assessing Reflective Writing

The assessment of reflective writing needs to be constructively aligned with the intentions of the programme within which it occurs. If not, beginning reflectors may doubt its importance, seeing it as an unnecessary additional burden. In order to

promote engagement with reflective writing, it may be necessary to make it mandatory so that people experience its benefits and can then choose to use it thereafter. Of course, facilitators can guarantee the uptake of reflective writing by making it part of a programme's summative assessment.

Methodology

Like any effective assessment task or strategy, reflective writing must be assessed using clear criteria that relate to the learning outcomes of the programme in which the reflective writing task is being used. Table 1 below suggests a basic set of criteria that can be used both to guide reflective writing and to assess its outcome. As the Table illustrates, we suggest that both the product of reflective writing—for example, a teaching portfolio or journal—and the process that leads to it are assessed.

Table 1: Basic Criteria for Assessing Reflective Writing

Product		Process	
Quantity	**Quality**	**Relevance**	**Depth**
• Length • Presentation • Regularity	• Quality of expression • Clarity • Thoroughness	• Understanding • Application to course Relationship to course • Relationship to purpose • Evidence of progress	• Critical thinking • Honesty • Cognitive skill • Generalising experience • Synthesis • Analysis • Evaluation

A typology derived from Moon (1999) that can be used in the teaching of reflective writing is shown in Table 2 below. These categories can serve both as a guidelines for writing and as criteria in its assessment.

Table 2: Assessing the Depth of Reflective Writing (based on Moon 1999)

	Description	Consideration from a single (personal) viewpoint	Consideration and evaluation of multiple viewpoints	Multiple historical and socio-political contexts
Descriptive writing	✓			
Descriptive reflection	✓	✓		
Dialogic reflection	✓	✓	✓	
Critical reflection	✓	✓	✓	✓

The typology shown in Table 2 links with the identification of the stages of student epistemological awareness provided in the work of Baxter Magolda (1992). From empirical research findings, she proposes four distinct and increasingly sophisticated stages in relation to the acquisition of knowledge. These stages progress from a view of knowledge as absolute and incontestable to a view of it as contextual and open to evaluation from the student's own critical position. The four stages are summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Assessing the Development of Students' Epistemological Understanding

Stage	Knowledge	Learning	Teaching	Assessment
Absolute knowing	Absolutely correct answers exist	Absorption of knowledge from experts	Transferring the knowledge	Checking if the knowledge has been acquired
Transitional stage	There are doubts about certainty	A need to understand	Facilitating understanding	Checking for understanding
Independent knowing	Knowledge is uncertain; everyone has a valid opinion	Development of own opinion	Supporting independent views	Valid expression of a view
Contextual knowing	Constructed and judged on the basis of evidence	Critical examination of the quality of claims in context	Partnership in developing appropriate knowledge	Judgement of knowledge claims in context

Table 1 offers initial guidelines for assessment; Table 2 focuses on the nature of the writing; and Table 3 focuses on the conceptual development of the writer. Together, they offer a comprehensive set of assessment criteria.

Conclusion

The role of teaching as a form of expanded scholarship has been elucidated by Boyer (1990). One implication is the need for critical and independent thinkers in higher education who will engage in the formulation and critique of new knowledge. Reflection and reflective writing offers a means by which such thinkers can be developed. Reflective writing is not a natural process, however; a reflective mindset needs to be nurtured. Students require guidance and formulas and structured practice. The process may begin mundanely and focus on only one aspect of learning or experience. At its highest level, however, it will consider experience from multiple perspectives. Writing involves both physical and mental activity, becoming a medium through which experience is represented and meaning acquired for the

writer and others. It acts as a form of thinking rather than simply its record. This is why the reflective journal is an essential element of the reflective process and why writing can lead to important personal and professional resolutions. Reflection can be disturbing, but it can lead to a greater awareness of personal responsibility and professionalism in higher education.

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