

Improving learning through reflection – part two

Karen Hinett

Summary

Drawing on research into student learning this article provides a rationale for the introduction of reflection into programmes of learning in higher education. Reflection might be seen as both an approach and method for improving the quality and depth of student learning. Reflection is a way of thinking about learning and helping individual learners to understand what, how and why they learn. It is about developing the capacity to make judgements and evaluating where learning might take you. The following pages explore these issues and offer definitions, examples and links to websites and projects where reflection is currently being used.

Keywords

Reflection, learning, assessment, evaluation, judgement, self- and peer-assessment, portfolios, motivation, metacognitive.

Biography

Karen Hinett is education developer at the UK Centre for Legal Education (LTSN Law). She is responsible for the [events programme](#) and co-ordinates the [Project Development Fund](#). She also co-ordinates the [evaluation strategy](#) for the Centre and is a member of the Learning and Teaching Support Network evaluation steering committee. Karen contributes to the Centre's [research strategy](#) and has published in the area of learning and teaching.

Karen's principal research interests are assessment, student learning and quality enhancement. She is currently working half-time on a [research project](#) looking at the perceptions and practice of law teaching, and is external advisor to a research project at the University of Gloucestershire looking at the implications of the introduction of personal development profiles for staff development.

Prior to joining UKCLE Karen worked as assistant project manager on an FDTL project exploring the use of self- and peer-assessment in higher education. She has undertaken consultancy work for the [Bar Council](#) and is a member of the [Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education](#) (ILTHe).

Ways of supporting reflection

In Part I of this article we discussed the concept of reflection both as a tool and a structure for learning. Part II looks at implementation issues and begins with a brief overview of the different ways of developing reflective practice.

Self- and peer-assessment

All students want to know how well they are doing. Self- and peer-assessment enable those actively involved in the learning process to provide valuable feedback on student work and complement the comments made by tutors. Engaging students in self- and peer-assessment helps students to understand what constitutes quality work and to develop

evaluative skills. It gives learners time to engage in a process of dialogue about what constitutes quality and to monitor their own progress. As Boud (1995) maintains:

'If students mark their own work, either with respect to specified standards or their self-established criteria, they not only release staff for educationally worthwhile activities, but they are encouraged to reflect on their own work and the standards which can be applied to it.' (Boud, 1995)

The Self-assessment in Professional and Higher Education (Saphe) project helped support staff in law and social work to develop tools of self- and peer-assessment. Drawing on the experience of the participants in the project, we identified that self- and peer-assessment:

- Focus the time available for tutor feedback on the substantive issues of theory and practice;
- Provide a structure and a framework for discussions about the quality of work;
- Enable students to plan for the future and to make changes to their work and practice while they are engaged in the process and act of learning rather than post-experience;
- Help students to become critical about their own work and the discipline-related body of knowledge;
- Help students (particularly those in creative areas such as art, fashion or design) understand that judgements about quality are subjective and can only be substantiated by reference to other work;
- Improve communication about quality and standards between students and staff;
- Can be used as evidence of standards for the purpose of external accountability (Hinett and Thomas, 1999).

Revised versions of the existing work can be found at: <http://www.swap.ac.uk/Approaches/assessment2.asp>. For ways to integrate self- and peer-assessment try Boud (1995) or Cowan (1999) (particularly pages 83-85).

Learning Logs and Reflective Diaries

These can be used to support learning on individual modules or across programmes. As identified in Part I, learning logs commonly use a set of prompt questions to get students to think about their own progress and to identify any key areas for development. They may support key learning activities such as a work placement or monitor the development of skills throughout a programme of learning. They are a form of qualitative self-assessment in which students reflect on their learning and how they might make improvements.

Portfolios

Often used on professional programmes where there is a practical or work experience element, portfolios are a collection of evidence, usually supplemented with a reflective commentary. Students include evidence in the form of notes, reports or presentation slides and cross-reference this against criteria to demonstrate competence in each area. The reflective statement supports and authenticates the evidence as the work of the individual student. Statements from academic tutors, placement tutors and people in positions of responsibility may also be included to validate evidence submitted from extra-curricular activities and work. Portfolios can be used as the main form of assessment for a programme of study (Certificate and Diploma courses designed for new teaching staff in higher education institutions typically use portfolios). Julian Webb provides a useful overview of the issues involved <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/portfolios.html>.

Personal Development Plans (PDPs)

Used in much the same way as a portfolio, a PDP is usually a combination of evidence and reflection. It is commonly used in undergraduate programmes to support the development of key skills and guide career planning. Many PDPs involve students in tasks such as SWOT analysis, learning styles inventories and the construction of a curriculum vitae. Students are encouraged to reflect on a regular basis (eg. weekly). This reflection may or may not be assessed by a tutor. See <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/pdp.html> or the recording achievement site: <http://www.recordingachievement.org/>.

The QAA is supporting the introduction of personal development portfolios to supplement the information known about a particular student. See the policy documents for more details: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfilehe/summary/pdppolicy.htm>.

Action Learning Sets

These are used primarily to promote group work but also promote reflection on learning. Students are often required to construct and subscribe to a learning contract, stipulating rules of conduct for the group and the promotion of values

of fair play. They can be used to encourage reflection on group work and team working skills. As Tom Bourner maintains:

'The action learning sets could serve different purposes at different stages of a course. At an early stage they could be used to support project-based learning. On a large modular course the action learning set could be used to support (and challenge) the development of an 'integrative reflective document' whereby a student integrates the learning from the modules that they have chosen by reflecting on the relevance of what they have learned to their own personal and professional aspirations. At the end of a course of study they could be used to develop a 'learning contract' for their continuing professional development.'

See: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/asd/Bourne.htm>

Students working in an action learning set can discover areas of uncertainty and common ignorance. Learning sets allow students to work together in a supportive and non-threatening environment to solve each other's problems. Individuals are encouraged to take the risk of looking ignorant and to draw on the support of the group. In this sense the action learning set adds a dimension to group work not offered by a more formal seminar (Hinett and Thomas, 1999). Learning sets are a way of encouraging reflection through team work. Students learn to become less dependent on tutors, to evaluate their own and each other's work and to give and receive feedback that will be useful to their future learning. Perhaps most importantly, students learn from making mistakes and accepting and embracing new challenges.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL)

Traditional programmes of learning are front-loaded with content knowledge and assess students when they are considered to have suitable understanding of the issues involved. PBL turns this model on its head and begins with a problem for which a solution is sought. This is likely to involve students in communication with a number of agents. The learning is experiential and to make sense of progress students have to take continual stock of what information they have and what they need in order to solve the problem.

See the following sites for more information: <http://www.hss.coventry.ac.uk/pbl/>

UKCLE PBL site: <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/pbl/resources.html>

Virtual and Managed Learning Environments

Increased use is being made of C&IT to promote deep learning and reflection. Synchronous and asynchronous discussion or chat rooms can be facilitated by email. These can be particularly useful for supporting reflection and maintaining communication between students on distance-learning courses. Interactive tests can also be developed with software such as Blackboard or Web CT. Computer-aided assessments that include multiple choice questions and sequencing questions provide online feedback for students and encourage them to reflect on how well they have done. Virtual learning environments typically involve students in a fictitious company or role. Drawing on PBL, students commonly have to find the answer to a problem by seeking out information. Tutors pose as key players and provide the information and correspondence needed by the students.

See: http://www.law.strath.ac.uk/public/staff/paulmaharg/Legal%20education/delict_game.htm

This list is by no means exhaustive and each of the methods can be used in conjunction with another. For instance, learning logs may be a requirement of a VLE or PBL approach. Whatever method you use there will be inevitable teething problems. This next section looks at some of the factors affecting successful implementation of reflection.

Implementing reflection into teaching

There is no point in suggesting that methods of reflection can be bought prêt-à-porter and inserted into course programmes at a suitable point. Pedagogic development that makes a real impact on student learning, unfortunately, just isn't that easy. It takes time, thought and commitment to make a difference to the learning experience. The rewards, however, both for the students and the teachers are enormous. In most cases, reflection increases motivation, confidence and general interest in the subject area (Hinett and Thomas 1999, Boud 1995, Orsmond et al 2002). However, this is often only appreciated some time after the process of reflection has begun. In short modules where learning logs are used the benefits are often only appreciated by students at the end of the module and often follow weeks of well voiced complaint along the lines of 'I don't see the point' or 'Assessment is your job/ you get paid to do it/ why should I assess myself/peers'. The only way of dealing with this cynicism is to accept in advance that it will happen and that it is a natural part of any implementation process. Indeed, if students and staff take to reflective processes like proverbial ducks to water it may be time to worry!

Time

Reflection by its very nature is ongoing and takes time. An individual learning log or evaluation form can provide a snapshot of learning at a particular time but it is only one piece of the jigsaw. As discussed in Part I, for a learner to appreciate how far she or he has come requires some kind of evidence of reflection over time. This might be a journal spanning a length of time, taped video performances across a programme of study or a portfolio of achievement. The complaint by many lecturers is that the collection of evidence and reflection takes time that just isn't available within a modularised curriculum. There is no disputing that supporting virtual learning environments and discussion groups does take time but those involved would maintain that the dividends in learning are worth the initial investment in time.

Validity and plagiarism

In many ILTHE-accredited courses new lecturers put together a portfolio of evidence of their teaching, learning and assessment supplemented by a reflective piece. The value is in the creation of a document that reveals the development of the individual's repertoire of teaching skills and ability to overcome problems in the classroom. The evidence is the proof that the reflection is genuine and that real development has taken place. The sequence of events that result in changed behaviour and action are revealed through the writing and where it occurs, through oral defence. Falsifying, copying or downloading reflective material is problematic since it needs to fit not only with the experience and evidence provided but also with the values, opinions and previous reflections of the individual. The more individualised the reflection, the more likely it is to be the genuine article. This gives confidence about reliability and is good news for those concerned with plagiarism.

For guidance on assessment and reflection try the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service:
<http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/jiscpas>.

Commitment and emotion

Facilitating reflection requires two things from staff: a commitment to the principles of reflection and engagement in a process of reflection and self-awareness. Students are fast at detecting staff resistance and soon lose interest if what is being promulgated as 'good for them' isn't being replicated by staff. Leading by example is necessary if reflection is going to be useful, not least because it helps tutors appreciate that disclosure is emotionally and intellectually demanding. Drawing on Goleman's work, Alan Mortiboys defines emotional intelligence as the 'ability to develop the ability to recognize and to manage emotions in yourself and in others' (Mortiboys, 2002). He argues that:

'Anyone planning staff development activities based on reflection must consider the level of emotional intelligence required of the participants for it to be a success and should be alert to opportunities to structure the activities so that the development of emotional intelligence is encouraged.'

This doesn't mean disclosing personal inadequacies and fears at every available opportunity; it means creating a supportive environment where students feel safe to reflect and to admit that they don't understand.

Reflection means being aware and accepting that on the spectrum between failure and success is a huge grey area of mediocrity. It is about achieving a state of what Perry (1970) called 'contextual relativism' which denotes acceptance that there are multiple interpretations of what is right and wrong in any one academic discipline. Russell Ackoff argues that what distinguishes 'understanding' from 'wisdom' is this uniquely human ability to 'discern, or judge, between right and wrong, good and bad' (see <http://www.outsights.com/systems/dikw/dikw.htm>). Enabling an environment in which students embrace challenges and accept getting things wrong as part of the process of learning is one of the key achievements for reflective practice. How this is achieved in practice depends on the capacity of teaching staff to engage in the process themselves, taking time to take stock of existing practice and identify where reflection could enhance the learning experience.

Discipline sensitivities

All those involved in the Self-assessment in Professional and Higher Education project (Saphe) realised early on that the self-assessment would only work where it was designed with due consideration for the particular discipline and institutional context. Empirical evidence supports the need to tie educational innovation to particular disciplines (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Methods need to be translated into the appropriate discourse of the discipline. Certain phrases have particular meaning to certain subjects: for instance in law the term 'negotiation' refers to a particular legal skill whereas, in the humanities it simply means conferring with others to reach an agreement. Likewise the term 'reflection' needs to be articulated in a way that is meaningful to the subject and situation experienced by learners.

As teachers and staff developers we need to think about the audience. We can be clear without being patronising to students. If we mean 'think about what you did and how you might do things differently' then let us say that instead of

lapsing into what Phil Race describes as 'academese'. 'Academese' is a language and jargon used in validation or assessment procedures by academics. Using buzzwords and trendy jargon serves to confuse rather than illuminate. Clear, effective semantics help both staff and students to understand what is required.

Access and equity

Commitment to raising standards in higher education while simultaneously widening participation and access to it means that, now more than ever, assessment methods have to perform a number of functions. When designing assessment it helps to distinguish between summative modes, used for the demonstration of standards, and formative modes, within which reflection commonly falls, for the purpose of erudition. Diversity of assessment is beneficial not only for students with a disability or learning difficulty but for all students. Providing a variety of media by which work can be assessed such as written, oral, video, web-based or performance also allows for greater freedom and access for an increasingly disparate group of students. Reflection can be illustrated and evidenced in any of these forms. As lecturers we have a responsibility under the Disability Discrimination Act to anticipate the needs of students and to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that people who are disabled are not put at a substantial disadvantage in accessing further and higher education. TechDis has produced 'Accessible Curricula: Good Practice for All' which gives advice on improving teaching practice and assessment. It can be downloaded free at www.techdis.ac.uk/pdf/curricula.pdf.

(For further guidance on assessment issues contact the National Disability Team at: www.natdisteam.ac.uk and download documents supporting learning and teaching from the Disability Rights Commission website: www.drc-gb.org).

Reflections

This article has shown that reflection can be used in all subject disciplines and to support the development of specific skills and/or career development. The references and links will, I hope, allow those new to reflection to make a start. There are no promises that it will work first time; in fact research and personal experience suggests that it probably won't! My personal recommendation would be to resist the temptation to revolutionise all your assessment in favour of reflection, to keep a balance and to use reflection to complement other teaching methods. One final suggestion: accept that this is an ongoing journey of development for you as a teacher and for your students. The portfolio or log may be used for summative assessment purposes but they represent a process of thinking about learning. Reflection isn't a quick fix. Well-thought-through strategies to promote reflection and wisdom are likely to increase motivation and make for a satisfying learning experience for both staff and students.

Comments are welcomed and should be sent to Karen Hinett at k.v.hinett@warwick.ac.uk

References

Ackoff, R, cited in Bellinger, G, Castro, D and Mills, D 'Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom' Accessed 27 November 2002 (<http://www.outsights.com/systems/dikw/dikw.htm>)

Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines* (2nd edition). (Buckingham: Open University Press/SRHE)

Biggs, J and Collis, K (1982) *Evaluating the Quality of Learning: the SOLO Taxonomy* (New York: Academic Press)

Biggs, J (1999) *Teaching for quality learning at university* (Buckingham: Open University Press)

Bloom, B et al (eds) (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals: handbook I: the cognitive domain* (New York: Longman)

Boud, D (1995) *Enhancing learning through self assessment* (London: Kogan Page)

Boud, D and Walker, D (1998) 'Promoting reflection in professional courses: the challenge of context', *Studies in Higher Education* 23(2), 191-206

Claxton, G (1999) *Wise up: the challenge of lifelong learning* (London: Bloomsbury)

Bourner T and Flowers S 'Teaching and Learning Methods in Higher Education: A Glimpse of the Future'. Accessed 27 November 2002 (<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/asd/Bourne.htm>)

Cowan, J (1999) *On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher: Reflection in Action* (SRHE and Open University Press)

Eraut, M (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence* (London: Falmer)

- Goleman, D (1996) Emotional intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ (London: Bloomsbury)
- Hinett K (2002) 'Assessing Failure or Failing to Assess?' in Wareham T and Peelo, M(eds) Failing Students in Higher Education. SRHE and Open University Press
- Hinett, K (1995) 'Fighting the Assessment War: the idea of assessment-in-learning' in Quality in Higher Education, Vol 1 (3), 211-222
- Hinett K and Thomas, J (1999) (eds) Staff guide to self and peer assessment (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development)
- Hinett, K (1997) 'Towards Meaningful Learning: A Theory for Improved Assessment in Higher Education' Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Central Lancashire
- Knight, P and York, M (2002) 'Using Pedagogic Research in course design and delivery: employability and transferable skills', Discussion Paper given at the Generic Centre 'Using Pedagogic Research in Course Design and Delivery' Conference, 8 October, Birmingham.
- Kolb, D (1984) Experiential learning: experience at the source of learning and development (London: Kogan Page)
- Laurillard, D (1993) Rethinking university teaching: a framework for the effective use of educational technology (London: Routledge)
- Macfarlane, J (1998) 'Pedagogic principles, certification needs and the assessment of "reflective practitioners"' International Journal of the Legal Profession 5(1), 1-23
- Moon, J (1999a) Reflection in Learning and Professional Development, Theory and Practice (London: Kogan Page)
- Moon, J (1999b) Learning Journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development (London: Kogan Page)
- Morgan, N and Saxon S (1991) Teaching Questioning and Learning (London: Routledge)
- Mortiboys A (2002) 'The Emotionally Intelligent Lecturer'. SEDA Special No 12. Staff and Educational Development Association. Birmingham. (<http://www.seda.ac.uk>)
- Orsmond, P, Merry, S & Reiling, K (2002) 'The Use of Exemplars and Formative Feedback when Using Student Derived Marking Criteria in Peer and Self Assessment' in Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education Vol. 27 no 4, pp 309-323
- Perry, W (1970) Forms of Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston)
- Price, E (1998) 'Instructional Systems Design and the Affective Domain' in Educational Technology 38 (6), 17-24
- Race, P (2002) Evidencing reflection: putting the 'w' into reflection (ESCALATE Learning Exchange) (<http://www.escalate.ac.uk/exchange/Reflection>)
- Schön, D (1983) The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action (Boston: Arena Publishing)