
Supporting reflective processes with students: insights from a review of research

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Context

This briefing note is intended for staff within higher education whose students engage in reflective processes as part of their learning. We offer a framework that tutors may employ to help shape the way in which their students carry out such processes. The framework was developed during a review of research studies pertinent to professional education, with a particular focus on new academic staff.

Introduction: streams of consciousness or genuine learning?

The notion of 'reflection', by which we broadly mean the extended consideration of problematic aspects of knowledge or practice, is now widely employed across higher education, especially in professional contexts and in personal development planning for students. Reflection, for instance, may be used to help an individual understand their professional practice or to gain insights into their progress against a set of personal goals.

The conceptual overview for the review, however, highlighted the open-ended nature of this notion, with theorists further identifying various forms of reflection. For instance, van Manen (1977) refers to *technical reflection*, which concerns the examination of the means that have been used to achieve certain goals, *practical reflection*, which also involves consideration of the ends themselves, and *critical reflection*, which addresses judgments on such issues as the underlying ethics and the wider social environment.

The review also emphasizes the challenge that students may face in learning how to engage in such complex thought processes. For one thing, it is difficult to sustain a problematic focus over an extended period, especially when there might be uncomfortable implications for one's own professional practice or approach to life. And Vygotsky (1978) also argues that the ability to engage in a thought process stems from social interaction: processes occur first between people and are only then internalised.

Given both the open-ended nature of the term and the need to learn how to reflect, programmes that simply expect students to ‘engage in reflection’ are more likely to see streams of consciousness on minor technical issues, rather than anything that will lead to genuine learning.

Supporting reflective processes

During the review we thus developed the notion of a ‘directed reflective process’, with an accompanying framework to operationalise it. The term ‘reflective process’ highlights the range of possible forms of reflection, and the need to select from amongst these forms; while the word ‘directed’ emphasises the way in which the process must both be targeted and supported, enabling it to achieve the necessary depth. The review suggests that a concerted effort is required in order to direct a reflective process; an insight evident, for instance, in one of the studies included within the review (Bell, 2001).

Our framework for a directed reflective process is outlined in the Table. This framework was developed through a theoretical synthesis of 69 research studies, with the synthesis achieved through a use of grounded theory and practitioner dialogue. Indeed, dialogue is particularly critical in this framework, allowing as it does for social modelling and internalisation of the process, and also facilitating problematisation. Each of the elements within the framework is integral to a directed reflective process.

Core reflective process (task and focus):	<p>Task – Students complete an extended task (e.g. keeping a reflective diary) or series of tasks (e.g. incorporating a cycle of activities or a progression in the level of challenge).</p> <p>Focus – The task is focused on specific areas (e.g. an aspect of professional practice, development in relation to a set of personal goals, or a form of disciplinary expertise); whether in relation to the area itself, its foundations, or the accompanying reflective process.</p>
Social basis:	Dialogue plays a key role in sustaining a focus on problematic issues, with a role for the voicing of a range of views and experiences, modelling of good practice, challenges, prompts, questioning, crossing of boundaries, insights from literature, specialist language, technology and feedback.
Personal basis:	A reflective process is directly affected by the way in which a person engages in it, becoming inherently different as individual abilities, qualities and identities vary. Ownership, level of experience, personal and professional identity, and roles are all important factors in this.
Wider context:	The context in which the reflective process unfolds (of programme, workplace, discipline and institution) affects, for instance, the scope to introduce change or to engage in dialogue.
Intended outcomes:	Covering changes in practice or expertise, and ability to engage in reflective processes; at both personal and collective levels. Close alignment is required between the focus of the reflective process and the intended outcomes.

Table: The elements of a directed reflective process

These elements of the framework, however, should not be viewed in isolation to each other. In particular, the core reflective process and all of the remaining categories must lead or point in the same direction if a targeted and sustained process of problematic deliberation is to result, as suggested in the Figure below. One approach to ensuring this alignment is to base practice in relation to each element of the framework on one or more theories, whether in relation to reflection, the profession, the discipline or pedagogy.

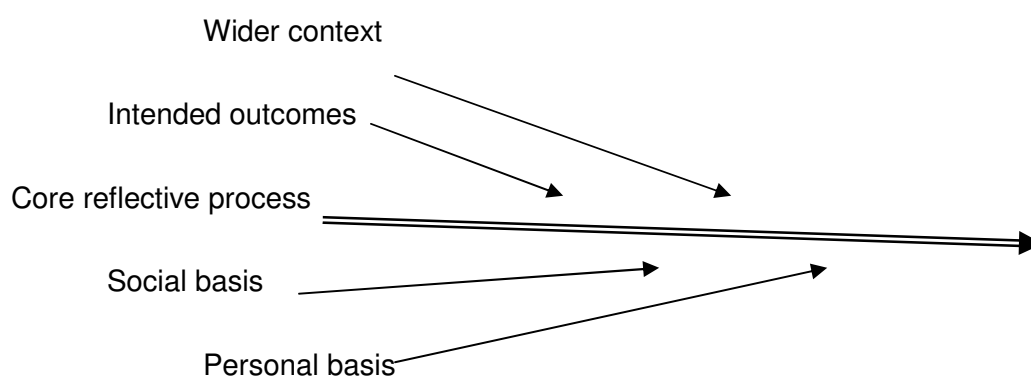


Figure: Aligning the elements of a directed reflective process

We would suggest that you create a proforma on the basis of the above Table (see also the appendices of the full review report, Kahn *et al*, 2006), and use this to record how the reflective processes that you ask your students to carry out incorporate each element of the framework. Such a proforma could also include a further column to enable you to indicate how different elements of the framework support are aligned with each other. Indeed a similar proforma may be of value in analysing how students are inducted into other complex open-ended thought processes, whether stemming from a discipline or profession.

Conclusions

We believe that this framework offers an accessible means to help shape student learning, enabling directed reflective processes that result in desired patterns of learning. The review also highlighted the importance of professional learning for staff who run programmes: if you are to benefit more richly from this briefing note, it will be important for you to engage in further investigation into issues of particular relevance to your own context, ideally in collaboration with colleagues.

References

- Bell, M. (2001). 'Supported Reflective Practice: a Programme of Peer Observation and Feedback for Academic Teaching Development' *International Journal for Academic Development* **6**(1), pp.29-39.
- Kahn, P.E., Young, R., Grace, S., Pilkington, R., Rush, L., Tomkinson, C.B. and Willis, I. (2006) 'The role and effectiveness of reflective practices in programmes for new academic staff: a grounded practitioner review of the research literature', Higher Education Academy, York, [Online, 1st October 2006], www.heacademy.ac.uk/4885.htm
- Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

Further reading

The conclusions for the review were based in part on a number of studies that overlapped most directly with the framework. To find an indication of these studies, the reader may wish to look at the following:

- Boud, D., Walker, D. (1998). "Promoting Reflection in Professional Courses: The Challenge of Context." *Studies in Higher Education* **23**(2): pp.191-206.
- Ho, A. S. P. (2000). "A Conceptual Change Approach to Staff Development: A Model for Curriculum Design " *International Journal for Academic Development* **5**(1): pp.30-41.
- Manouchehri, A. (2002). "Developing Teaching Knowledge through Peer Discourse." *Teaching and Teacher Education* **18**(6): pp.715-737.

For a general introduction to the use of reflection in learning and professional education, see:

- Brockbank, A. and McGill, I. (1998) *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*, Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press, Buckingham
- Moon, J. (1999) *Reflection in learning and professional development: theory and practice*, Kogan Page, London

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Full report can be downloaded for the Higher Education Academy website:
<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/4885.htm>