Reflective writing

Martin McMorrow
Centre for Teaching and Learning
Massey University, New Zealand

Slides available at:
http://tinyurl.com/studyreflectivewriting
m.s.mcmorrow@massey.ac.nz

Overview of Session

What is reflective writing?
Different purposes for reflective writing
Difficulties for teachers and students
General framework for reflective writing
Example of a reflective journal entry
Checklist and evaluation of a second example
Conclusion

What is reflective writing?

- essay
- reflection

- classical
- harmonious
- static
- strong
- post-modern
- dynamic
- discordant
- vulnerable

Reflection as a critical thinking tool

Aim
• to provide evidence of critical application of theory to practice (in line with Dewey, 1933)

Example
• Management: Reflective Journal (3500 words)

Your journal will focus on three vignettes from either your own experiences as a leader, or your observations of other leaders in action with whom you have associated. Each vignette will contain a summary of the story which you want to highlight, and then a scholarly critique of that story using relevant leadership theories from class discussions.

Reflection as a training tool

Aim
• to provide evidence of achievement of professional competencies (and identify gaps for further development). [see Zeichner & Liu’s critique (2010)].

Example
• Speech and Language Therapy: Online portfolio (6 pages)

For each range of practice (e.g. speech, swallowing, fluency) students are required to write a one-page self-reflection on their competency development during the year, referring to clinical placements, learning and research.

Reflection as a tool for holistic processing of experience

Aim
• to provide evidence of integration of professional and personal learning (e.g. Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985)

Example
• Social Work: Weekly Lab Journal (350-500 words)

This journal is intended to encourage self-reflection and integration of the material, and be a kind of private conversation between you and the lecturer/tutor: … You should … include personal thoughts, impressions, questions, reactions, struggles, new ideas, etc. to the readings, classroom presentations, lab sessions or discussions. You will not be evaluated on your opinions, but on evidence and personal growth.
Difficulties of reflective writing

Students

- may not have any relevant experience or training
- may ‘default’ to more familiar discourses (e.g. narrative, essay or literature review)
- may be uncomfortable in exposing their limitations and blunders
- may receive little explicit guidance about purpose, form or expectations

We go to the lecturer and ask him ‘How are we supposed to do the assignment?’ and he says, ‘It’s your assignment; do whatever you want’. And some people are sitting there and thinking, ‘I've got no idea’. Like me for instance. I was like, ‘I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing.’

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General framework for reflective writing

DESCRIPTIVE
- Reports concisely and clearly a learning experience

ANALYTICAL
- Problematises the experience – asking relevant questions and identifying gaps or contradictions in existing knowledge or competence

CRITICAL
- Makes insightful connections between this learning experience and the ‘bigger picture’ of professional development and/or theory
- Sets specific and relevant learning goals

Based on van Manen, 1977; Jay & Johnson, 2002

Example journal entry – part 1 (descriptive)

My focus this week is on the communication aspect of team leadership. I can’t often meet my team face-to-face, as most are part-time, hourly paid staff and work at different centres and times. This means I rely on group emails as my primary channel of communication. On Monday, I emailed the group to remind them to use our branding on training materials. I’d found some handouts in the photocopier with the logo of a competitor one trainer had worked for. This trainer (who I hadn’t named in my email) sent an angry response complaining that she had no time to produce new materials. She used ‘reply all’, so the whole team became involved. Several phone calls were required to sort out the confusion and calm everyone down. It was a classic ‘storm in a teacup’.

Example journal entry – part 2 (analytical)

Clearly, email was an inappropriate channel of communication; any message that can be perceived as disciplinary is best delivered face-to-face (Simon, 2015). It reinforced an impression of distance between the staff and me (as a representative of institutional bureaucracy). It is another reminder for me that in order to build a more collaborative culture, “every discussion and interaction has an element of re-establishing trust” (Kaats & Opheij, 2014, p. 2.2.2). At a deeper level, it also made me wonder: If staff feel the branding is irrelevant, do they also feel their work is no different from any other institution? How can I help these part-time, casual staff develop a sense of common purpose, which is recognised as a hallmark of effective teams (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Parker Follett, 1987)?

Example journal entry – part 3 (critical)

This relates to my overall challenge of developing leadership within a loosely-coupled organisation (Weick, 2001). I need to develop a more ‘respectful leadership’: tolerating error, respecting boundaries and encouraging potential (Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). I’m applying this in a ‘fine-tuning’ approach (Dunphy & Stace, 1993) towards the photocopying issue; instead of the ‘stick’ of disciplinary warnings, I’m offering trainers the ‘carrot’ of having all their copying done for them. And to develop a team-based culture, I’m proposing for pairs of trainers to share professional development projects and to present their ‘best practice’ at monthly meetings.

Reflective Writing Checklist

DESCRIPTIVE LEVEL
- Does it describe a personal experience in a professional context?
- Does it provide relevant information about the situation?
- Does it summarise a problem or opportunity?
- Does it describe one or two responses to the problem or opportunity and an outcome?
EXAMPLE FOR EVALUATION

This happened last Monday. I was working at the hotel reception desk at night. A guest called reception because she had cut her hand. Because the normal duty manager was sick, I was alone at the desk and I couldn’t find the first-aid kit. I locked the front door of the hotel and went to the room. I used a towel to help the guest cover her hand and I called a taxi to take her to the hospital. The guest was satisfied with my help. However, the manager told me I shouldn’t have locked the front door or left the desk because that is against health and safety regulations. I also shouldn’t have treated the guest myself because I don’t have a valid first-aid certificate. I should have called the 24 hour doctor – the number is in the ‘Emergencies’ folder on the desk. I was very upset because I thought I’d done the right thing. I’m also afraid my manager won’t give me a good reference.

Reflective Writing Checklist

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Reflective Writing Checklist

ANALYTICAL LEVEL

- Does it explain immediate and underlying factors related to the problem or opportunity?
- Does it explore the effects of the problem or opportunity for the organisation and/or stakeholders?
- Does it raise relevant questions related to your professional development?

Reflective Writing Checklist

CRITICAL LEVEL

- Does it make insightful links to theory or professional principles?
- Does it provide evidence of learning?
- Does it apply this learning to professional practice?
This experience has deepened my understanding of the need to align individual initiative and creativity with organisational principles and goals (Harmer, 2014). As a novice manager, I could only draw on my personal resources to respond to the emergency; in its own terms, this was successful. The problem was that my creative response was not aligned with organisational policy. However, as Collins (2014) argues, creativity and resilience cannot easily be acquired, as their roots lie deep in the personality and life story of the individual. Therefore, I can see this experience, not as a success or failure in itself, but as evidence of my underlying aptitude for management and as a stage in my journey from personal to professional competence (Dixon, 2009). Therefore, I have studied organisational policies as well as broader professional standards (e.g. NZHM Code of Practice 4.3) for emergencies and arranged for an informal test and simulation session with the regional manager during her visit next month.

**Reflective Writing Checklist**

**CRITICAL LEVEL**

1. Does it make insightful links to theory or professional principles?
2. Does it provide evidence of learning?
3. Does it apply this learning to professional practice?

**Conclusion**

Try to understand the purpose of your reflective writing – different purposes require different content, structure and style

What all kinds of reflective writing have in common is the need to provide evidence of learning through experience

Aim for a balance between descriptive, analytical and critical elements.

**References**


