

Fundamentals of Reflective Practice (Reflective Writing)

“We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience.”

– John Dewey

Reflective writing assignments are a common feature in many Experiential Learning courses at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) and other higher education institutions. These assignments are designed to stimulate introspection, fostering learning and personal growth. However, some students find themselves unsure about the purpose of these assignments and what their professors expect from them. It is important for students to understand that there is a strong connection between reflective writing and critical thinking.

What Is Reflective Practice or Reflective Writing?

Reflective Writing is often associated with **‘busy work’ or less rigorous and non-academic writing**. Consequently, students sometimes don’t take it seriously and are not aware that there are formal conventions for how to approach and structure their reflective writing assignments. This is why it is useful to think of reflective writing assignments as “reflective practice,” which may suggest a more formal and academic approach to writing.

Definition

Reflective writing or practice involves thinking deeply and carefully about an experience or event.

John Dewey defined reflection as the:

“active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.”

In a professional or work-related context, reflection is understood as the process by which professionals connect with their own experiences and, in so doing, develop an awareness of their baseline knowledge in a specific area. Put simply, reflection can be thought of as the ability to think about and critically analyze experiences to improve understanding.

While instructors may require students to engage in Reflective Practice through a wide variety of types of writing (see below), most reflective writing assignments can be approached and organized according to one of the following two common models:

1. **The DEAL Model**
Describe, Examine, Application to Learning
2. **Driscoll's WHAT, SO WHAT, NOW WHAT Model**

What Constitutes Good Reflective Writing?

To be effective, reflective writing must inform the reader of your accomplishments and how they can be transferred or applied to a different context. A strong piece of reflective writing typically has the following components:

1. **A detailed description of the assessed activity or experience.**
2. **A connection between the activity or experience and a course concept or theme**
Discuss the relevance of this activity or experience with respect to a course-specific concept or theme.
3. **A concluding statement or paragraph**
Relate the activity or experience to future course content or other opportunities or experiences you may have outside of that course. This last step is critical in Reflective Writing as it provides an opportunity for you to apply or articulate the learning that occurred, a key attribute of Experiential Learning.

Six Common Types of Reflective Writing Assignments

1. **Weekly Journal:** As the name suggests, this assignment requires you to write weekly entries where you describe and consider the relevance of class or internship work that has been accomplished during the week. This form of reflection can also be kept daily.
2. **Learning diary:** This assignment is a collective diary where you share personal reflections with other team/group members. Learning diaries are particularly effective when created by a group and can serve as a trust-building activity.
3. **Log book:** This assignment is common in courses where experimental procedures or protocols are required. A detailed log book can reduce the likelihood of errors or problems in a laboratory or when conducting fieldwork. For example, much like a ship captain's log, daily accounts of events with specific and accurate information can be used as a reference for future challenges or issues that crop up.

4. **Reflective note:** These are common in the practice of Law, but can be used effectively in a variety of learning contexts. Reflective notes are short pieces of writing linked to specific events/cases and are kept on a regular basis to inform future decision-making processes.
5. **Essay diary:** Not unlike an annotated bibliography, this regular diary helps you to better prepare the necessary arguments to support a particular point of view (i.e., thesis). In other words, it is essential to provide context to the experience. Simply describing the events of the day will not suffice, as the absence of context will make the diary entry less relevant if examined at some future point. If the event is documented and a context applied, keeping a daily diary as part of your summaries after a lecture, can help you to prepare future plans of study, etc.
6. **Self-assessment:** This form of critical self-assessment permits the writer to explore the “What, So What, Now What” model described by Driscoll (2007). Taking the time to describe the results of an experience and situating in the context of a specific goal allows you to benefit from the critical exploration of any of the positive as well as negative consequences that would have resulted from that experience.

Example of Reflective Practice

The sample of student writing below provides an illustration of how a common Reflective Practice assignment follows both Driscoll’s “What, So What, Now What” model, and the DEAL model. It should help you understand how to approach and structure your own Reflective Practice assignment.

This assignment was written by a first-year student in an interdisciplinary first-year seminar called The Science of Learning. The course introduced students to research on the best approaches to developing and improving foundational academic skills such as writing, problem-solving, or critical thinking. The assignment was worth 10% of the students’ final grade and required students to write between 550-700 words reflecting on any learning experience in the course. References and a bibliography were not required, but students were expected to make specific references to course content (readings or lectures or in-class activities).

Note that the colour coding and underlining in the text is a means for identifying where the student’s writing corresponds to the different sections of the “What, So What, Now What” and DEAL models of Reflective Practice. The annotations describe what the writer is doing in each section and why.

Reminder

You may choose to present information in a different order from what this example or the models suggest.

Legend

1. **WHAT** – Description/ explanation of what was done, may include discipline-specific language
2. **SO WHAT** – Critical evaluation or relevance of what was done
3. **NOW WHAT** – Conclusion and recommendation based on the writer's experience

Our task was to complete a full-term assignment that required all team members to contribute and collaborate in order to be successful. The act of working in a group required that the work to be evenly distributed. Communication was key during the course of this assignment as [having] only one lecture a week, limited the amount of time we could communicate during class. Therefore, time outside of class was arranged to meet and complete the assignments to the best of our ability.

The first paragraph describes the circumstances of the assessed activity or experience.

In other words, it addresses the “D” (DESCRIBE) in the DEAL model or the “WHAT” portion of the Driscoll model. The author uses descriptive vocabulary and does not attempt to analyze or interpret the task. For example, the student writes “time outside of class was arranged to meet and complete the assignments to the best of our ability.” She makes no attempt to explain this activity or analyze its significance.

Note, the “DESCRIBE” or “WHAT” section of the assignment represents the most basic form of reflection and serves only as a detailed recounting of an event (activity or exercise). There is limited reflective value in this paragraph other than its ability to record the details of what has transpired. However, a complete description is still essential in order to situate the paragraphs that follow. In other words, it is not possible to describe the impact of the **activity or experience** without first articulating in detail what they were.

Teamwork has not always had a great impression on my academic career. However, this experience allowed me to be more open-minded towards groupwork. During this activity, I felt a greater sense of teamwork, collaboration and respect. Initially, I was not aware that the majority of the course would be based on teamwork. If I had known, I probably would not have taken or considered this course. My previous experiences with groupwork have been negative as I was usually the only one who actively wanted to succeed. Most of the workload was done by one person, and the entire experience was not fulfilling. However, this experience, was based on my lack of understanding of what constructive group work is really like. I had not considered the important role that collaboration plays in our growth as students and as people. In this course, groupwork was very effective and the work was not only evenly distributed, but students were able to appreciate the importance of collaborative learning. The professor had mentioned during the first lecture that collaborative learning is exceptional and can allow students to retain more information compared to individual studying. Moreover, during this course, groupwork was discussed and practiced regularly.

The second paragraph provides the “E” (EXAMINE) in the DEAL model or the “SO WHAT” in Driscoll’s model of Reflective Practice.

It attempts to interpret or evaluate the description in the first paragraph. For example, in the first paragraph (amber) the writer notes that the “task was to complete a full-term-assignment that required team members to contribute and collaborate.” In the second paragraph, the writer attempts to place this description of an **activity or experience** into a more meaningful context by stating that her previous experience with group work has been negative: “Teamwork has not always had a great impression on my academic career.” By connecting the described experience with these negative associations, the writer EXAMINES (DEAL model) or considers the SO WHAT (Driscoll Model). For example, the writer not only describes the experience as negative but provides evidence to support that claim: “Most of the workload was done by one person, and the entire experience was not fulfilling.” The evidence suggests that the work was not shared and was completed by a single group member. The result is problematic and the writer has identified that scenario as having contributed to her feeling unfulfilled. The writer goes on to add that “The professor had mentioned during the first lecture that collaborative learning is exceptional and can allow students to retain more information compared to individual studying.” Since one of the course’s themes is to provide collaborative learning opportunities, the frustration on the part of the student is palpable and relevant to the **activity or experience**.

The experience of groupwork during this course has allowed me to develop and enhance my skills as a team player. The skills I have acquired are interdisciplinary and can be applied to my education in the future. Furthermore, being able to work collaboratively, problem solve and communicate in an effective manner are all skills that I can utilize in the coming years, despite the career I might pursue. Teamwork encourages the idea of each person pulling their own weight and working in an engaging and academic setting in order to benefit the entire group. For instance, if one were to become a surgeon and had encountered a difficult case which had an inconclusive diagnosis, teamwork would be essential. Multiple doctors would work together to problem solve by practicing the same skills learned in class to diagnose the patient in an accurate manner.

In this last paragraph, the author has attempted to apply this activity or experience to a future learning opportunity and so has completed the “AL” (APPLICATION to LEARNING) part of the DEAL model or the “NOW WHAT” part of Driscoll’s model.

In this section she writes that “The skills I have acquired are interdisciplinary and can be applied to my education in the future.” This is a good example of how to link the present experience to a future context.

This last section of the assignment represents the deepest form of reflection in which you attempt to apply your learning to something new. This is essential in order to maximize the benefits that result from the use of Reflective Practice. This is particularly apparent in this piece of writing when the author notes “Teamwork encourages the idea of each person pulling their own weight and working in an engaging and academic setting in order to benefit the entire group.” This is effective, because she refers to the course concept of “teamwork” articulated in the previous section and then demonstrates through a specific example how knowledge of that concept could be applied in the future: “if one were to become a surgeon and had encountered a difficult case which had an inconclusive diagnosis, teamwork would be essential.”

References

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More resources

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