

Critical and reflective questions

- 1 How did I approach major writing assignments at school? What was successful about these approaches, and what was not? What did I learn from my school writing experiences?
- 2 How have my writing approaches been different so far at university? In what ways have my approaches to writing been successful, and in what ways have they been unsuccessful? Can I see how I will approach future assignments?
- 3 What have I learned about the subject discipline I have entered at university? What expectations about writing does my university or discipline have?
- 4 What advice would I give to next year's first-year students about how to approach written assignments?
- 5 What is the value of having strict conventions of formal writing in university and in my discipline? How might these conventions be valuable, necessary or unavoidable, and in what ways might they be overly restrictive or stifling?

Useful websites

- Illumine Training, Mind Map® examples, <http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk/mind-maps-examples.htm> (contains dozens of examples of mind maps created in different contexts).
- James Cook University, *Learning Skills Online*, "Mind Mapping", <http://www.jcu.edu.au/office/tld/learningskills/mindmap/index.html> (includes a link to a useful video from one of the fathers of mind mapping, Tony Buzan).
- Monash University, *Learning Support*, "Brainstorming and mind mapping for assignments", <http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/quickrefs/25-brainstorming.xml>.
- RMIT, *Study & Learning Centre*, "Mind mapping and brainstorming", http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsc/content/1_Studyskills/study_pdf/mindmap.pdf (useful information on both techniques with examples).
- *Study Guides and Strategies*, "Basics of mind/concept mapping", <http://www.studygs.net/mapping>.
- For useful free software to help you lay out your mind map, see FreeMind at <http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Download>.

7 REFLECTIVE WRITING

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THINKING AT UNIVERSITY

One of the major differences between secondary school or technical college and university is the depth at which students are required to think through issues. Most universities list 'critical and reflective thinking' among the attributes they expect of their graduates.

There are many definitions of both critical and reflective thinking – we suggest you look both terms up in your favourite subject dictionary or online dictionary (see a list of these on page 204 to get a sense of the various ways they are understood). Despite the variations, all commentators agree about one aspect: critical and reflective thinking are *high-order thinking*. They are much more complex than the linear, logical thinking that would have been typical of much of your previous education: they involve processes such as questioning assumptions, challenging, deconstructing and examining the contexts in which we reach understandings.

REFLECTIVE THINKING

In this chapter we will focus on reflective thinking, which we describe as a way of thinking where you question the assumptions that underlie particular actions and issues, then follow through a series of thoughts in order to develop your ideas deeply. You don't look for easy, quick answers. You may not solve some of your problems or questions in one semester – you may not reach definite answers about some of them during your whole course (or even your whole life!). Even when you have an answer that satisfies you at the moment, you might change your mind significantly about this in the future. *The way you work through your thinking is more important than your answer.*

REFLECTIVE THINKING AND WRITING

Some of our students tell us that they think reflectively without having to write down their thoughts. However active you are as a thinker, the process of writing generally deepens and extends this thinking – you may start by questioning, but by writing down your questions and pursuing them as far as you can, you will deepen these thoughts much more than if you had limited yourself just to thinking them. Most professional researchers value reflective writing, and many keep reflective diaries during their research projects.

Documenting your thoughts also provides you with a permanent record of your thinking that you can revisit later. Sometimes you will be amazed at how much your thinking has developed; at other times you will be equally amazed at how perceptive you were at an earlier time. In addition, writing supports your learning processes because it allows your teachers to 'eavesdrop' on your thinking and offer guidance.

In the reflection in Figure 7.1, mature-aged student Gareth Glanville thinks through his responses to his first few weeks of university study, asking himself questions.

So we've finished the first couple of weeks of the course and I feel a sense, I guess you could say, of relief. Its been 14 years since I first decided that town planning was the direction I wanted to take and now I have the opportunity to use my thoughts and observations that I've collected over the years. However I cant help but wonder that the fact that I've seen and experienced a great deal in this time is a hindrance. Will I be 'That Guy' that has to answer all the questions and give my opinion in a way like I know best? On the one hand I want to contribute to class discussions but on the other I don't want to take away from everyone else's opportunity to participate. Is even thinking this arrogance in itself? Am I wise because of how much I know or because I know very little? I guess I'll just have to see how things progress. These concerns really don't have anything to do with town planning so I would like to explore the two main discussion points of the last week.

Basically we looked at suburbia and the reasons for planning. I found it interesting that there seemed to be a degree of negativity towards suburbia. Is this a case of people biting the hand that feeds them? I assume that the majority of students here have grown up in the suburbs. Or is this negative opinion creeping in from elsewhere? Is the media influencing us? Or have we been taught that the urban sprawl of our suburbs is 'evil'? But surely the democracy of having a choice as to where and how we live is important to us. Perhaps this is related to the discussion on why we plan. Perhaps if suburbs are planned correctly then there is no problem with having them. If suburbs are democratic then are planning decisions based on majority rules? What about the minorities? Do we forget about them and not provide for their needs? Do we plan to make sure everyone is included? Do we play a role in shaping society as well as shaping a city's aesthetic? Do we even live in a society any more or do we live in an economy? Will our planning decisions be based on the bottom line or social need? Will a change in government have an effect on how Australia looks at things and will this filter down to us as planners? I mean my whole adult life all I've known is a

conservative federal government but can remember what it was like under Labor. Would a change in state government change how we would tackle planning issues? Are there good and bad planning decisions? Or is it that you can fool some of the people some of the time?

It's only the first couple of weeks and all I have is questions. Maybe if I keep my mouth shut [no chance of that] and listen I might get closer to some answers.

Gareth Glanville

Figure 7.1: Example of reflective thinking

You will notice immediately several things about this reflection:

- It is written in informal register (see pages 172–3), in the first person (see page 173).
- Glanville has identified his early assumption that he will stand out as a mature-aged student in a class of recent school leavers. He is working through what he sees as the contradictions between his desire to be accepted by his peers and his interest and engagement in the discipline.
- He asks a lot of questions but doesn't answer them all. In reflective thinking, questions are often more useful than answers in helping you to develop your ideas. And even when you find answers, they are often tentative or exploratory.
- It contains several grammatical errors and confused phrases, which Glanville has not edited before he submitted it. It is more important that students allow their ideas to flow when they write reflectively – they are writing for themselves, in order to develop their thinking, not for a lecturer or in order to demonstrate that they can write perfect English. They don't need to go through the redrafting and proofreading process they would use for an academic essay; in fact, it would be more useful for them to spend extra time writing more reflective pieces rather than perfecting each one. (Of course, none of the pieces in this chapter are as 'unpolished' as they might have been had students been truly just writing for themselves – it is very difficult to forget your teacher-reader when you know you will eventually submit your writing for scrutiny, whether you will be marked on it or just receive comments.)

In the rest of this chapter we will discuss more of the qualities evident in this example, so that you can develop your own reflective writing practices. All of the examples included in this chapter demonstrate a high level of reflective thinking, although they are all very different from each other. Reflective thinking is very difficult to teach because there are no formulas or recipes that work for everyone. You just need to write and keep writing, and to receive regular feedback from your teachers and fellow students about your reflective thinking. It will also be helpful for you to read as many examples of other people's reflective writing as possible. Therefore, in this chapter we will include more examples of our students' writing than in other chapters. As you become a more experienced reflective writer you will start to find your own voice, but in your first year you will probably need to try a range of different approaches, and some of the examples in this chapter may provide you with valuable models.

TWO VERSIONS OF REFLECTION

You can think of reflection in two different ways, both of which are valid. First, there is the conventional understanding of reflecting as letting your thoughts range deeply and in a sustained way about a particular subject. Synonyms for this connotation of the verb 'to reflect'

include ‘to ponder’, ‘to cogitate’, ‘to explore’, ‘to wonder about’, ‘to brood over’, ‘to consider’, ‘to deliberate’ and ‘to ruminate’.

A second, and deeper, understanding of reflection is what we call *critical reflection*. It involves identifying the assumptions that underlie particular beliefs, and questioning those assumptions. These assumptions could be our own, or they could belong to other people. Critical reflection may occasionally lead us to change our entire view of the world. For example:

- In social sciences or cultural studies, students might look deeply at people’s actions to examine their underlying assumptions and expectations, or how their position in a particular group has shaped the way they behave; or they might consider their interrelationships with others in terms of their position and power in a particular community. This type of critical reflection might completely change the way students view particular groups of people in society.
- Courses with practical components such as education, medical imaging and psychology usually require students to reflect deeply on their own practice to consider why they acted or responded as they did in particular situations, what underlying assumptions shaped their responses and how they might improve or alter their practice.

This second version of reflection is common among academic researchers and professionals, who often choose to turn a reflective light on themselves, examining their own underlying assumptions, expectations and position in their research communities.

John Dewey, an educational philosopher, described the act of reflection as having two subprocesses: ‘(a) a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt; and (b) an act of search or investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief’ (1910, 9). Some of our students feel uncomfortable accepting this ‘perplexity, hesitation, doubt’. It takes some practice to ‘sit with’ the discomfort and allow your thinking to range widely. We suggest you think of the reflective thinking process as pondering on a chain of questions, each question requiring you to think deeply, which generates other questions, without seeking definite, permanent answers. Notice how Gareth Glanville did this in his writing on pages 92–3. You might also find Figure 7.2 useful: this mind map was created by Open Universities Australia (OUA) student Samia Scott from an iLecture on reflection.

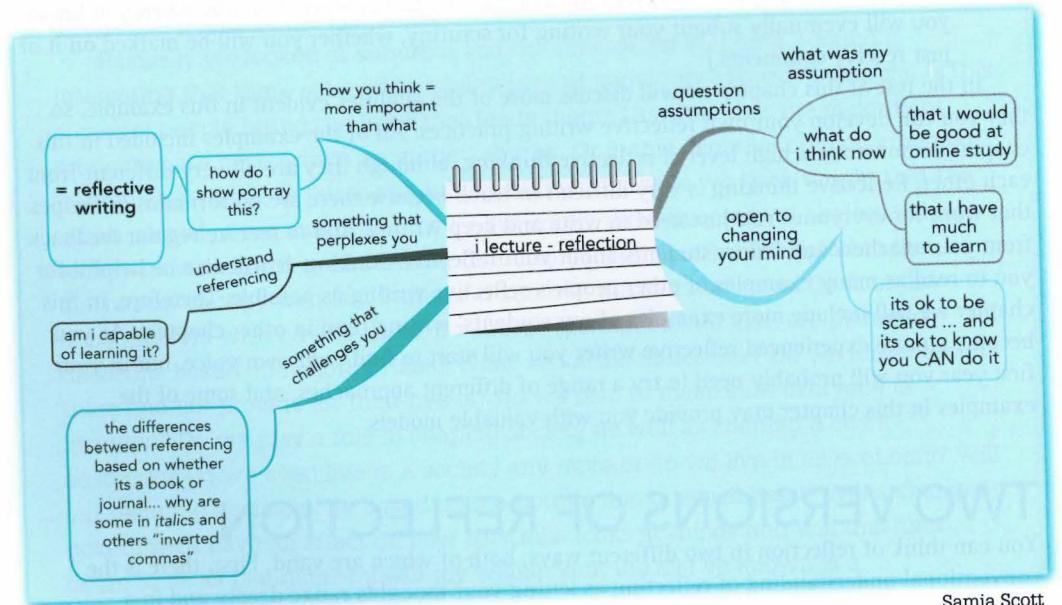


Figure 7.2: Mind map on reflection

REFLECTION FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Reflective thinking is very challenging for most first-year students. In 1994, Patricia King and Karen Strohm Kitchener published a ground-breaking study into how students and adults learn to think reflectively. They analysed examples of reflective writing from thousands of students in the United States, and created a seven-level hierarchy of reflective thinking, of which only Levels 6 and 7 were truly reflective: Levels 1 to 5 they saw as necessary preparation for the top two levels. They found that when first-year students arrived at university they were generally thinking at Level 3 or 4, and that they became more critically reflective throughout their undergraduate years, reaching Levels 6 and 7 only in postgraduate studies. This does not mean they recommend ignoring reflective thinking during the first years of study; in fact they insist that becoming reflective is an incremental process, and that students must give it attention throughout their undergraduate studies in order to develop their reflective thinking (King and Kitchener 1994). Figure 7.3 shows an example of a student, Leigh Gornall, beginning to reflect critically on the issue of intercultural communication. As a student of construction management, he is becoming aware of some of the issues that will arise in his future professional life. As you read, you will notice he realises that he needs to question some of his earlier assumptions; he is beginning to do this in this piece of reflective writing, and has left his thinking open in recognition that it will continue to deepen in the future.

Intercultural communications is not a topic I'd previously thought about in great detail, however the class left me pondering some very interesting questions. Having spent a lot of my time in small communities of similar cultural diversity, I've had very little exposure to people of different cultures. The idea that cultural communications plays an important role in a lot of industries got me thinking; is this going to be something I will have to deal with as a future project manager? Maybe my lack of cultural exposure will hinder my career prospects. What steps should I take to ensure this doesn't become a future problem?

... Our discussion got me thinking how easy it must be to inadvertently offend people even with simple cultural misunderstandings. So how can I stop myself from inadvertently making these cultural misunderstandings? How can I become an efficient communicator amongst culturally diverse groups? Maybe I should be learning another language. Or travelling. Should I be trying to learn every aspect of one culture or a multitude of others? Should I be looking at Asian, Middle Eastern, European, Latin cultures? Unfortunately I don't have all the answers just yet; perhaps this is something that can only be learnt over time.

Leigh Gornall

Figure 7.3: Example of early critical reflective writing

There are two broad areas on which you will most often reflect as a university student:

- You can reflect on your own work as a student and an apprentice professional, to consider how and why you did something, and how you might improve it next time. This will make you a better learner and more adaptable in your future profession.
- You can reflect on other people’s work – ideas you read or hear in lectures and so on. This promotes deeper learning because it encourages you to think actively and widely about the ideas, and to tie them to other things you already know about.

Both of these types of reflective writing will improve your performance in your profession and, ultimately, improve the professions themselves, as members of the professions question why they are doing things in particular ways, how they can perform better and how they fit into the particular communities in which they work.

REFLECTIONS ON BEING A STUDENT

In the reflection in Figure 7.4, medical imaging student Alex Young examines the problematic issue of teamwork, trying to penetrate the depths of her reaction to it in order to cope with it better in the future. Her reflection is valuable to her because it allows her to think through her past experience of group work and to question whether her bad experiences have made her more intolerant of students who don't 'pull their weight'. She also makes some useful comparisons between working in friendship groups and working with people she doesn't know well, and reaches the mature conclusion that moving outside her comfort zone can actually be beneficial.

As mentioned earlier, I have been involved in many group work situations in the past but I have never been part of a group, which did not have to deal with some form of conflict. It seems that I am always cursed with at least one person who does not pull their weight; however, I am not so naive as to think that this only happens to me, in fact it seems as though this is the case for most people I know. There have been many situations where I have been forced to make up for other peoples' laziness, yet they still received the credit for my work. Unfortunately this has led me to become less tolerant when it comes to people who do not do their fair share of work. I also have higher expectations when it comes to group participation simply because I have allowed too many people to sit back and let everyone else do their work.

A major difference between this task and others was that we were given the opportunity to choose our own groups. To many people this was a great idea; however, I have learnt that having friends as group members is not always an advantage. It is always much easier to deal with group conflicts when there is no pre-existing relationships between the people. Despite knowing this I still formed a group with my friends, as did many others in the class. I now realise that by doing so, I have unwittingly attempted to stay within my comfort zone. If groups were to be selected by teachers it would undoubtedly have encouraged people to move outside of their usual comfort zone, which would prove a beneficial challenge for most people.

Alex Young

Figure 7.4: Example of reflection using past experiences and comparisons

It is interesting to compare Alex Young's reflection on teamwork to the following one from Matthew Degnan, a mature-aged student (Figure 7.5) who reflects on his teamwork experiences in study in terms of his previous experience in the workplace. It is important that you bring to bear your life experience, whatever it is, on your reflections. Like Alex Young, he also considers what he can do to improve teamwork activities rather than criticising fellow students or tutors – after all, you can only impact on your own attitudes and behaviour, rather than those of others!

My expectations for teamwork are influenced mostly by my workplace experiences – which are completely different to the academic setting. At work, teams have established structure and culture. When I think about it, the opposite applies for the assignment team. It is a temporary group comprised of individuals with informal/loose roles, there are no levels of authority (except for tutors and coordinators who sit outside the team), there is no formal delegating or reporting, goals are less established, relationships have not been forged, and lack of face to face contact slows down evolution of the team. I wonder if others on the course draw similar comparisons; most will have work experiences to relate to. Across the course these experiences are likely to be very diverse, so expectations of teamwork could be equally diverse. I wonder if there are students on the course who work in similarly loosely structured teams. Do teams like this exist in the construction industry?

I think it is important to look more closely at the individuals within the team to get a picture of how it's working. Are they less motivated to work on the assignment, are they reluctant to contribute in a team scenario, is confidence an issue? Or are there other pressures, such as work load relating to other courses or even employment? Family life may also be contributing to factors that conflict with the efforts.

Ultimately there are reasons why team assignments can fail that are out of my control. But I need to understand what I can do to make the team a success. Can I improve my communication skills, could I have negotiated and influenced in different ways to get a better outcome? Upon consideration, I feel a bit naive going into this team assignment with expectations set like I did, especially given teamwork can be so unpredictable. However, it's all a learning process. And I think I can apply the experiences through the rest of my studies.

Matthew Degnan

Figure 7.5: Example of reflection applying life experience to reflection, and focusing on what can be done to improve the situation

In Figure 7.6, Kelley Shaughnessy, a mature-aged student returning to university to study interior architecture, reflects on a significant topic for our students – how she can manage her time so that she can learn more effectively.

I am re-learning how to learn. The difference, I feel, between studying now and study then is that I am studying something I am very passionate about. The course requires essay writing and exams so that my knowledge can be tested. Learning about learning is an interesting exercise. I have the ability to draw on history to see what did not work for me and what I need to alter so history doesn't repeat. Cramming did not work for me. I crammed for exams and I crammed for my essays. The outcomes were okay, but I could have done much better. As an older version of myself, I am frustrated at the younger version of myself. Knowing how much easier studying could have been is frustrating; however, this is an important tool with which to apply now.

I have a lot less spare time with a six month old, a two year old, social commitments, a house to run and university studies. I find it ironic and somewhat confusing that I manage to do a lot more now than I ever did, with a lot less time to do it in!

Is this due to structured work for 10 or so years? Organisational skills that develop when you have children, at the cost of possibly never getting anything done? Could it be a product of my desire? I am confident that it is a sum of all three. I am also confident that without one of the above mentioned parts, the outcome, the commitment to study, would not be possible.

Kelley Shaughnessy

Figure 7.6: Example of reflection comparing past and current approaches to learning

A comparison with Shaughnessy's reflection is another reflection on time management, this time from more recent school leaver Clare Allender, who is using the reflection to challenge the ways she uses her study time.

I have been sitting at the computer for approximately five minutes now trying to plan out in my mind what I will write about my time management skills. About two minutes in I have already opened Facebook so that I can simultaneously talk to my friends while I try and 'plow through' all of my work. I then spent the next three minutes explaining to a friend what I did yesterday, coincidentally this involved procrastinating and hardly making any headway in the assignment I had planned to at least get half way through. So, do I currently have good time management skills? I hate to say it, but obviously not.

Why is this so? Well upon reflection of Year Twelve and the constant stress I was under continuously pumping out assignments and study notes for weeks on end then suddenly I had nothing to do for three and a half months. That contrast of having very effective time management skills to have nothing to do in my time that needed management I think has totally thrown me off working effectively with my time.

I have always valued doing things efficiently ... though this sense of urgency never seems to transfer over to my academic life. Why the discrepancy? Again, I am unsure of this but I suppose the answer lies in having the ability to access websites such as Facebook with such ease while I am on a computer.

What must I do to ensure that in the future I am an effective time manager? Well, firstly I will have to start to work on this now, in university, so that when I begin to work in a professional environment I actually manage effectively. Secondly, I will have to learn from my own experiences not only how to effectively manage the time but how poor time management can impact upon the lives of others.

Clare Allender

Figure 7.7: Example of reflection using questioning

Notice that both Shaughnessy and Allender think back over the ways they have managed their time in previous periods of their lives, and Allender looks forward to the ways she imagines she will have to work as a professional. This technique of juxtaposing different times of our lives is very helpful in thinking reflectively.

Reflections on professional preparation

If you are enrolled in a course whose major focus is to prepare you for a particular profession, you can reflect on how your understandings of your profession are developing. In particular, your course may include a professional practice component – such as in education and many of the health sciences – and you can benefit greatly by reflecting on your experiences in these practicals. Figure 7.8 is a piece of reflective writing from Tahnee Bunting, a student of urban and regional planning, reflecting on how she can become part of her new profession. Notice that, as you saw in previous reflections, she ponders on many questions to which she has no quick, easy answers.

She calls herself a planner?

The question posed to us on Thursday in communications was 'where do you think you fit?' and it made me think about when will this become clear? Is it the day we graduate? Or when we pass a particular unit? Will this day come out of the blue or is it a rite of passage as a university student to have this uncertainty?

As a young planner I hope to join the Planning Institute of Australia in the near future as a representative to the future Town Planners of Australia but feel this should be done when I understand planning enough to make a 'great' impression on those that are likely to be in my workforce, or to even have an idea about planning. Is this wall I've created due to the fact that I don't know what sort of planner I want to be or who I am as a planner? Should this be something that I should know straight away?

... Being surrounded by impressive figures in the planning industry can be very overwhelming. I constantly feel like I'm being tested and ridiculed when often I am probably not even noticed out of the tens of thousands of faces that pass through the grounds of Curtin University. These planners are published and have had and still have such a large say in the planning industry that I can often feel unworthy or inadequate in their classrooms, purely because of their status in the planning industry. At the same time I am surrounded by peers that will go onto become planners in the industry that will have a say in what happens to the world. When do they all start to feel more planner-like? One of my classmates is working as a Cadet Planner, does that mean he is more like a planner than the rest of us?

Tahnee Bunting

Figure 7.8: Example of reflective writing on future professional life

Activity 7.1: Reflective writing on yourself as a student



activity

With another student

Discuss your responses to one question or issue that has arisen for you this week in your studies. This might concern your own study skills, your sense of what it means to you to be a student or a professional practice experience. Write down as many questions as you can about this issue without seeking answers at the moment. Listen to your partner's responses to your thinking and use their responses to develop your thinking more deeply.

As an individual

Write your reflection in as much detail as you can (at least 300 words). Resist the temptation to write a diary entry ('Yesterday I went to X lecture and the lecturer told us about Y, then I went to Z tutorial and the tutor asked us to do an experiment'). Write on only one issue so that you write in depth.

In a group or a class

Listen to volunteers reading their reflections and discuss the qualities of each. Focus on the characteristics that make each piece reflective.

REFLECTIONS ON IDEAS YOU ARE ENCOUNTERING

In Chapter 2 we talked about the importance of engaging actively with your lectures and reading in order to develop a deep understanding of the ideas presented. Here are some questions you can ask yourself about your lectures or reading:

- Which ideas did I find most interesting, challenging or inspiring?
- What new ideas did I learn?
- How does an idea (or a group of ideas) link with what I know already about my discipline?
- What connections can I see between this text (lecture, website, book, etc.) and other texts I know?
- How did the ideas develop or change my understandings of my discipline?

In Figure 7.9, Eric Denholm, a student of urban and regional planning, reflects on the issue of sustainable development, an issue he is being challenged to think about throughout his course, as well as in the media.

The issue of sustainability raises a few points. If we truly want to believe that we are not compromising the needs of future generations then surely we must all immediately stop the way in which we choose to work, travel, relax and play? If we are to achieve sustainability does this suggest that society must go back to the ages before the motor car; before Industrialisation; before we lived in comfortable houses and apartment blocks? Could this be the only way of protecting the world's environment and natural resources?

Perhaps I am simplifying this. When planners talk about sustainability they do not expect that we completely change our lives. I suppose they do want to change

some of the things we currently do. Every decision a planner makes can affect how sustainable society will be. Are high-rise developments the answer? Should we all be living in high densities so we can all walk or catch public transport to our desired destinations? I can see how this will have a smaller impact on the environment; our ever-expanding Perth can move up instead of out. But do these types of high-rise developments use more resources to construct? Is this component unsustainable? What about families and aged people; do they want to live in a bustling city centre?

The other issue I have is that word 'need'. Who is making the rules to say what society needs and what can be given up? Yes there are alternatives to motor vehicles, but in reality there are alternatives for everything we do. Do we really need a Plasma TV, or air conditioning; or are these just 'wants'? How are we to know what the needs of the future generations will be? Are they the same as ours? If we are furiously mining all of our resources out of our great state, are we thinking of the future generation; or are we thinking of the money that can be generated so we can buy ourselves another bell tower?

I do not have the answers for how we can achieve sustainability, but it is certainly an issue I look forward to exploring in my studies over the next four years.

Eric Denholm

Figure 7.9: Example of reflective writing on issues raised in lectures

The reflection in Figure 7.10, by construction management student Anna Dewar-Leahy, is a response to a video on the impact of the construction industry in Dubai (Sinclair 2009).

I have actually, honestly, never considered that the construction industry could be unethical or ethical for that matter. To me it has always been a black and white industry; things get built by people who know how to build them when someone pays them all enough. Since when are people and the environment being exploited in the name of construction? How naive of me.

The video that we watched in class was a major shock. Disgusting in fact that so many people on such a large scale, from so many backgrounds were being exploited in the name of building and construction. Ultimately it boils down to money. How can large companies actually get away with this behaviour? Why is it acceptable and who is monitoring these types of practises?

Ethical practises in construction management would probably mean a loss in profit and a much more sustainable outlook for the environment. Being ethical would mean that no matter the cost, managers would always consider the negative aspects and impacts that could occur as a result of the constructions and completely rectify them or not take on the project.

Anna Dewar-Leahy

Figure 7.10: Reflective writing used to challenge assumptions

Dewar-Leahy is using her reflective writing piece to respond to a video that challenged her previous assumptions about ethics in the construction industry. Her thinking will influence the rest of her studies and her future professional life.

Activity 7.2: Reflective writing on ideas you are encountering in your studies

Go through the process outlined in Activity 7.1 on an idea you have encountered in your studies (e.g. in a lecture, in your reading or on a YouTube recording).



activity

We now return to our earlier comments about reflection at first-year level being a preparation for deeper critical reflective thinking in future years. In Figure 7.11, Chris Lodge reflects on an issue he has been challenged to consider throughout his first-semester studies: the 'Great Australian Dream'.

Many issues attracted my attention in this lecture about suburbia and the Great Australian Dream. Perth suburbia to me is ideal when you consider the lifestyles available. This made me begin to wonder what the ideal lifestyle is to the average person. Does a backyard that is big enough to fit another family home really satisfy our lifestyle needs? I considered my own lifestyle where we as a family rarely use the considerably large yard, with the exception of family events such as birthday parties, barbeques and other social gatherings. Lifestyle rarely requires the use of such space, but nevertheless I would never wish to lose it. The lecture made me realise that the majority of Australians share my attitude and drew my attention to what I believe is a misconception that people who think this way are selfish.

While Perth's suburbia is extremely extensive, so is our available geographical area. So why is it that more and more planners are pushing for higher density residential development in the close perimeter areas around the city? This question troubled me at first as I could not think why it is that people would choose to live in such places. It then occurred to me that not everyone opts for the lifestyle that I value.

Chris Lodge

Figure 7.11: Reflective writing can act as a record of your thinking

When contacted the following year for permission to include his reflection in this book, Lodge agreed, but added that he was embarrassed on reading this reflection because he felt his ideas had developed significantly since he had written it; however, this does not discount the value of this piece of writing. In trying to penetrate deeply into his thinking on the topic as a then first-year student, he was setting the foundations for his strong future studies; the most perceptive thinkers are those who continue to try out ideas, shaping, discarding, developing and contradicting them as they go. We are more concerned about our students who have no questions about what they are hearing than we are about those who try out half-developed ideas and change them frequently. Learning is about engagement!

THE FINAL WORD

This final word belongs to two students who reflect on what they have learnt from a semester of reflection (see Figure 7.12). Anna Dewar-Leahy, whose reflection on ethics in the construction industry we quoted earlier, is beginning to realise how valuable reflective thinking will be for her.

OUA student Naomi Fisher realises at the end of her first semester that critical reflective thinking has changed even the way she understands language, and that her approaches to learning have impacted on her whole family.

I started out not knowing anything about reflective writing or how to go about it. It was such an arduous task. I didn't understand why we would have to think so deeply about problems or interests then document our thinking process. It is a great way to solve problems and think more effectively and I now feel much more comfortable sitting down to add to my reflective journal, knowing the future benefits this style of writing will have.

Anna Dewar-Leahy

I never previously understood how pliable language is and how easily words can be adapted to create a perception or an illusion of what is desired. For example, I never considered the word 'sustainable' to be so flexible, or to represent ideas opposing my perception of sustainable. This flexibility of language has opened my eyes to different perspectives and understandings; also learning from these different points of view because they are just as valid, but I do pause to wonder how I did not notice these extremes in language before? Perhaps we bulldoze our intentions through life and assume everyone is on the same page or maybe we surround ourselves with subcultures who share the same point of view. This new understanding will help in the future to clarify communication, and articulate intentions and perspectives, so when ideas are being developed and compromised in the design process, perhaps I can work towards a better understanding of someone's needs.... Officially 'learning' for the first time in over 15 years has been challenging and liberating. Not only have I had to change my lifestyle, my whole family has had to adapt.

Naomi Fisher

Figure 7.12: Reflections on reflective writing

Critical and reflective questions

Consider these questions as you think about reflection:

- 1 Is my thinking becoming more reflective and critical as the semester progresses? How are these changes influencing the ways I learn?
- 2 Do I understand that a lot of my ideas are based on my assumptions, and that I can challenge these assumptions rather than just accepting? What particular assumptions have I identified and challenged already this semester?
- 3 How will critical reflective thinking be important for my professional life?
- 4 How do societies benefit from people challenging their own assumptions and the assumptions of others?