Evidencing your Reflection

After you've worked through this document, you should be better able to:

- Write the evidence based reflection part of the labs;
- Think in a reflective way about your learning, and other aspects of your professional practice;
- Choose ways of capturing your thinking about your work – in other words produce evidence of your reflection, allowing you (and others) to review your reflections;
- Use starter-questions as a productive agenda for reflecting about your teaching.

Taking charge of your reflecting

This material is interspersed with Activities. The Activities often suggest that you make notes in response to questions. While it would be worthwhile just to think through your responses to these questions, we suggest that it is even more useful for you to *capture* your reflections – i.e. to *evidence* them – so that later you will still be able to compare your views and ideas then, with how you felt when you first responded to the questions.

The purpose of this short section is for you to explore the rationale for reflection as a key factor underpinning both successful learning by students, and successful continuing professional development by their teachers in higher education. You are also likely to be asked to reflect on your learning as part of the tasks set by your Course Team, so check the links between this section and your course assessment details.

Optional Activity

If you have access to the comprehensive discussion by Moon (2004) in her book 'A handbook of reflective and experiential learning', scan through the contents, particularly Chapter 5, to gain a perspective on how thinking about learning and reflection has come together.
If you wish to go much deeper into reflection, reflective practice and learning, this book is a good starting place, and refers to a wide range of other related literature.

What *is* reflecting? How do I go about it?

"But *how* can I reflect? What do you mean by reflection? How will I know when I've reflected well?" are questions which students and staff alike ask about the processes of reflection. Moreover, "how can I *show* that I've reflected successfully?", "What will be deemed satisfactory *evidence* of my reflection?" are their next questions.

This section aims to help by addressing all of these questions. In particular, the principle underpinning this section is that reflection on practice can best be evidenced by answering well thought out, relevant questions, to help one to interrogate what one has done. But it is not enough just to think through our answers to such questions – even our best and deepest thoughts all too rapidly evaporate away. We therefore need to *capture* our thoughts – in other words to furnish *evidence* of our reflections. This is ideally achieved by putting pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard (for example in using a blog as a medium to capture our reflective thoughts).

Why reflect?

Reflection deepens learning and enhances practice. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Equally it helps us to make sense of what we've done, how we did it, and how we may do it even better next time. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning or practice to the wider perspective – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Reflection is equally useful when our learning (or our practice) has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-known pitfalls.

Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general. The ability to reflect is one of the most advanced manifestations of owning – and being in control of – a human brain. Have *you* reflected today? Almost certainly 'yes!'. But have you *evidenced* your reflection today? Almost certainly 'sorry, too busy at the moment'. And the danger remains that even the best of reflection is volatile – it evaporates away unless we stop in our tracks to make one or other kind of crystallisation of it – some evidence. In our busy professional lives, we rarely make the time available to evidence our ongoing reflection. But we're already into an era where our higher education systems are beginning to not only encourage, but also to *require* students to evidence their reflection. So what can we do to address the reflection culture gap – how can we approach

accommodating *our* lack of experience in evidencing our reflection, and help students to gain their skills at evidencing their reflection?

Where, when and by whom is reflection needed?

Reflection is increasingly required in education and employment. More specifically, *evidence* of reflection is required, for example:

- where students are required to build up 'personal development planning' portfolios, or learning logs, or records of achievement, both as evidence to be able to present to prospective employers, and (more importantly) as a proactive process to help them to deepen their ongoing learning as it happens.
- As part of the preparation for appraisal, and the follow-up after appraisal, where appraisees can get much more out of the whole process, and where well-trained and sympathetic appraisers can facilitate the reflection involved;
- In most areas of professional life, where continuing professional development is required or expected, and where it is important at any stage to be able to *show* that such development is indeed being undertaken in an organised and professional way.

Some professions have led the way regarding reflective practice, not least nursing and health care disciplines. But for other disciplines, progress has been slower. Hard-nosed engineers, mathematicians, scientists and business professionals have tended to shrug off reflection as subordinate to subject knowledge and skills. But the wider community beyond the campuses of higher education continues to value 'rounded' individuals, who can not only demonstrate subject knowledge and skills, but can develop and grow as circumstances around them continue to change and evolve.

Reflection: making sense of learning and experience

Making sense of what is being (and has been) learned is a key factor underpinning successful learning. 'Making sense' links to reflecting on the experience of having done some learning-by-doing (practice, repetition, trial and error, experience, and so on). Moreover, 'making sense' links to thinking deeply about incoming feedback (other people's reactions, praise, critical comments, seeing the results of one's teaching, and so on). Deep reflection needs far more than simply observation, and for observation to be at its best it needs more than just a reflective dimension (requiring in addition analytical, extrapolatory, and other aspects as well as just inward-looking aspects).

It remains the case however that people find it hard (sometimes even quite alien to their nature) to reflect, *and* to evidence their reflection.

Reflection as a basis for enriching learning dialogues

Perhaps the most powerful advantage of evidencing reflection consistently and coherently is that it opens up the possibility for dialogue with significant others, for example dialogue based upon evidenced reflection between:

- Teachers and learners, enabling learners to gain feedback on the quality and depth of their reflection, so that they are able to improve and develop both their reflection and their learning;
- Appraisers and appraisees, so that appraisal becomes a deeper and more meaningful process for both parties, allowing a greater depth of relevant discussion between them at appraisal interviews, and increased ownership of the appraisal agenda for appraisees.

The common ground among each of these scenarios is the development of a greater sense of ownership, both of what has already been achieved, and what remains to be achieved.

A widening agenda for evidencing reflection

It is probably unwise to attempt to 'teach' people to reflect (whether they be students, professionals, or employees). The process of reflection can indeed be *illustrated* to those whose reflection is to be improved, but in the final analysis reflection remains an individual act in most circumstances (though the increased benefit of a group of people being involved in shared reflection is even more significant in many situations where collaborative and team activity is to be encouraged).

The most efficient way of helping people both to reflect *and* to evidence their reflection can be to provide them with questions as devices to help them to focus their thinking, and direct their thinking to those areas of their work where reflection can pay highest dividends. This section presents some starting-point questions to illustrate the range of reflection that can be encouraged.

Reflection can also bring the benefit of addressing widening participation in higher education, where there are many more students from diverse cultures and educational backgrounds in the system than was formerly the case. This makes it all the more necessary to legitimate student reflection, and for teaching staff to have close encounters with the range of student reflection which can be uncovered, so as to enable them in turn to reflect and thereby to tune in better to the 'widened' student community.

Moreover, student reflection can be one of the most powerful vehicles for alerting teaching staff to the range and nature of problems that students may be experiencing, and allowing for compensation

and adjustment to be made to reduce the levels of risk. Furthermore, getting students to reflect on their learning, their aspirations, their triumphs and their disasters can add significantly to the value of their educational experience overall, and help them to work towards being more self-assured and self-aware graduates.

Reflection transcends time

Although many attempts to cause people to evidence their reflection tend to be backward-looking, the reflection which can be generated by simultaneous past, present and future-tense questions can be much deeper.

For example, the trio of questions:

1 What worked really well for you?

2 Why do you now think this worked well for you?

3 What are you going to do next as a result of this having worked well for you?

Is a much richer agenda for reflection than just any one of these questions on its own.

Some questions to help us to evidence our reflection on teaching

As in the example above, questions which aid deep reflection are rarely single questions, but tend to form clusters. There is often a starter question which sets the agenda, and frequently is a ‘what?’ question. Then come the more important ones – the ‘how?’ questions and the ‘why?’ questions – and sometimes the ‘…. else?’ questions which ask for even deeper thinking and reflection.

In general, it seems too obvious to state it, but simple ‘yes/no’ questions can rarely enable the extent of reflection which can be prompted by more open-ended questions such as ‘to what extent….?’. (Sadly, however, there remain far too many ‘closed’ questions on student feedback questionnaires, and unsurprisingly the level of student reflection that such questionnaires tend to elicit is limited).

Below are some clusters of questions – ‘families’ of questions one could say. The first part tends to be a scene-setting starter, and the sub-questions which follow are probing or clarifying questions, intentionally leading towards deeper or more-focused reflection. These questions are not in any particular order. A set of questions to aid us to reflect on an element of teaching we have just finished could use some of these as starting points, and usefully add in subject-specific and context-specific questions to help us to flesh out the agenda for reflection.

Such questions can extend to many continuing professional development contexts, appraisal contexts, and suggesting some agenda items for a learning portfolio for students. Whatever the context, however, the quality of reflection which is prompted is only as good as the questions which

prompt it. In other words, for optimum reflection, much more care needs to be taken with phrasing the questions than might have been thought necessary.

- What did I actually achieve with this element of learning? Which were the most difficult parts, and why were they difficult for me? Which were the most straightforward parts, and why did I find these easy?
- How well do I think I have been able to achieve the intended learning outcomes related to this element of the course? Where could I have improved my achievement? Why didn't I improve it at the time?
- What have I got out of doing this element of the course? How have I developed my knowledge and skills? How do I see the payoff from doing this element of the course helping me in the longer term?
- What *else* have I got out of doing this element of the course? Have I developed other skills and knowledge, which may be useful elsewhere at another time? If so, what are my own *emergent* learning outcomes from doing this part of the course?
- What was the best thing I did? Why was this the best thing I did? How do I know that this was the best thing I did?
- What worked least well for me? Why did this not work well for me? What have I learned about the topic concerned from this not having worked well for me? What have I learned about myself from this not having worked well for me? What do I plan to do differently in future as a result of my answers to the above questions?
- With hindsight, how would I go about this element of the course differently if doing it again from scratch? To what extent will my experience of this element of the course influence the way I tackle anything similar in future?
- What did I find the greatest challenge in doing this element of the course? Why was this a challenge to me? To what extent do I feel I have met this challenge? What can I do to improve my performance when next meeting this particular sort of challenge?
- What was the most boring or tedious part of doing this element of the course for me? Can I see the point of doing these things? If not, how could the element of the course have been re-designed to be more stimulating and interesting for me?
- Do I feel that my time and effort on this element of the course has been well spent? If not, how could I have used my time more effectively? Which parts of the teaching represent the time best spent?

- What advice would I give go a friend about to start on the same element of the course? How much time would I suggest that it would be worth putting into it? What pitfalls would I advise to be well worth not falling into?
- What are the three most important things that I think I need to do arising from this element of the course at this moment in time? Which of these do I think is the most urgent for me to do? When will I aim to start doing this, and what is a sensible deadline for me to have completed it by?

In short, reflection on our practice can be aided by setting ourselves questions to respond to, and capturing our responses so that we can continue to reflect on them.

Optional Review Activity

After reflecting on your own reactions to the discussion above, look at 'Reflective Practice' by Brown, Fry and Marshall (2003), which is Chapter 15 in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S (2003), *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education: 2nd edition'* London, Routledge. As you do so, jot down your thoughts about your own ways of reflecting, and how you capture your reflections.

Summary

You should have already started to think in a reflective way about your learning, and other aspects of your professional practice, in the context of this and other courses. You should also be in a position to choose ways of capturing your thinking about your work – in other words produce evidence of your reflection, allowing you (and others) to review your reflections, not least when required in connection with the assessment of your work on this course. You may well have found out how valuable it is to use starter-questions as a productive agenda for reflecting about your learning.

Reflection remains a vital part of adopting a professional stance to inform the development of your work in all the assessment and learning contexts you encounter, and it is useful whenever possible to seek and value feedback from lecturers and colleagues alike, to help you to reflect on your work.