

Reflective Writing - some initial guidance for students (handout)

By Jenny Moon

Introduction – reflection and reflective writing

Reflection lies somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting. Reflective writing is the expression on paper/screen of some of the mental processes of reflection. Other forms of expressing reflection are in speech, in film, in graphic portrayal, music etc. The expression of reflection is not, however, a direct mirror of what happens in the head. It is a representation of that process within the chosen medium - and reflection represented in writing, for example, will be different to that encompassed in a drawing. In other words, in making a representation of reflection, we shape and model the content of our reflection according to many influences. Factors that could shape your reflection into reflective writing might include:

- the reason why you are writing reflectively (personal reasons – e.g. in a diary or for academic purposes etc)
- whether others are going to see what you have written and who they are (e.g. no-one else; a tutor who will mark it; a tutor who will not mark it, friends etc.);
- your emotional state at the time of writing, and emotional reaction to what you are writing (e.g. - a disturbing event that you do not want to think about or something you did well and want to enjoy in the rethinking process);
- related to the above, how safe you feel about the material and anyone seeing it;
- what you know about reflective writing and how able you are to engage in it (see below)

– and so on. It is also worth noting that you will learn not only from the ‘in the head’ reflection but from the process of representing the reflection itself. Also, you will learn different things according to the manner in which you represent your reflection. For example, what you would learn from drawing a picture to represent reflections will differ from what you will learn in writing about the same content. It is a part of the process of writing reflectively to be as aware as possible of the influences that are shaping the writing that you actually do.

What is reflective writing?

We will start from what reflective writing is not. It is not:

- conveyance of information, instruction or argument in a report, essay or ‘recipe’;
- straight-forward description, though there may be descriptive elements;
- a straight-forward decision eg about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad etc.
- simple problem solving like recalling how to get to the nearest station.

In the context of your higher education programme, reflective writing will usually have a purpose (e.g. you will be writing reflectively about something that you have to do or have done). It will usually involve the sorting out of bits of knowledge, ideas, feelings, awareness of how you are behaving and so on. It could be seen as a melting pot into which you put a number of thoughts, feelings, other forms of awareness, and perhaps new information. In the process of sorting it out in your head, and representing the sortings out on paper, you may either recognise that you have learnt something new or that you need to reflect more with, perhaps further input. Your reflections need to come to some sort of end point, even if that is a statement of what you need to consider next.

It is also worth recognising that reflective writing may be a means of becoming clearer about something. For example, you might use reflective writing to consider the kind of career direction that you might take. Into the 'melting pot' you might then 'put' ideas, information, feelings, other people's perspectives and advice. A metaphor for reflection or its expression in reflective writing in this context is 'cognitive housekeeping' to imply its nature as a sorting out, clarifying process.

From what has been said above, it will be obvious that reflection is not a straight-forward and 'tidy' process itself. When you have to represent the process for someone else to read, you will inevitably tidy it up – but if a tutor is expecting reflective writing, s/he will not be looking for a dry 'single-track' account, or just a conclusion. It is also all right to use the first person – 'I' - in reflective writing.

Let us assume that you are reflecting on a presentation that you have just done in class. We said, above, that reflective writing is not a 'straight-forward' description. You will probably have to describe what you are about to reflect on and perhaps relate it to the purpose for which you are reflecting. But reflection is more than that. You might want to evaluate your performance in the presentation, for example. This may be represented by you questioning yourself, perhaps challenging yourself. You may consider your reactions, and even the manner in which you have initially viewed the situation and written about it. Your writing may recognise that others may have different views of the same event. So with regard to the presentation, you might think about the performances of others – and so on.

Some subject matter for reflective writing

Reflective writing may apply to anything that is relatively complex. You might reflect on:

- how to go about your dissertation topic;
- how well you wrote an assignment;
- experiences gained in your part time work;
- what your essay title means and how to go about writing it;
- how to present some project work;
- how you want to behave differently in some context;
- the way in which your non-work activities relate to the programme that you are on;
- the quality of a relationship with someone (to do with your programme or home or family etc);
- how well you got on in your programme last semester;
- your process in solving a difficult problem (e.g. in academic work);
- what you need to do to improve your study processes –

and anything and everything....

You will often find there to be unexpected rewards in working in this manner. You will find out things that you had not considered, you even find that your academic writing becomes more fluent; you may find that you can solve problems more easily when you have reflected on your processing of similar problems.

The quality of reflective writing

It is worth thinking of the quality of reflective writing as being on a continuum from rather superficial writings that are largely descriptive, to much deeper writings in which the questioning is more profound. Neither is necessarily right or wrong – they are just different. Reflective writing will need be ‘pitched’ according to the purpose for which the task is done. Those who are learning to become counsellors and need to question their motives for the way they work will require to take a much more profound approach, for example, than most others in higher education programmes. The challenge is at least to ‘go beyond’ descriptive writing. The questions below help to give a picture of the difference between descriptive and more profound reflection.