

How to...develop your reflective writing



What is reflective writing?

According to Stella Cottrell (2008, p.55), being reflective refers to an ability 'to sit with your experience, analyse and evaluate your own performance, and draw lessons from it'. Here, Cottrell (2008) seems to be stressing the importance of analysing, or asking questions, around your own experiences in order to unpack in more detail what is significant about your experiences in terms of what you think and feel, for example. In addition, she notes the ability of reflective individuals to be able to consider how they might use answers to their questions in order to help them approach similar future situations in a more informed way.

Secondly, Monash University (2007) contends that reflective writing can be based on the following;

- 'Description and analysis of a learning experience within the course,
- Description and analysis of a past experience,
- Review of your learning or course to that point and
- Description and analysis of a critical incident.'

From the information above, Monash University (2007) indicates that reflective writing needs to go beyond merely giving descriptions of events and analyse, or unpick in more detail, what happened?

Why? What were the **consequences** (good and bad)? What **lessons** can be **learnt for future situations?**

Thirdly, the University of New South Wales (2008) asserts that there are various components of reflective writing, including;

- '[an individual's] thoughts, feelings, experiences, opinions, events or new information,
- A way of thinking to explore your learning and an opportunity to gain self-knowledge,
- A way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning,
- A chance to develop and reinforce writing skills and a way of making meaning out of what you study'

This perspective tends to focus on personal learning, such as **what** you are learning about yourself (how you feel about certain events, situations etc. and how you approach them, depending on your characteristics). In addition, elements of New South Wales' (2008) approach see reflective writing being about **how** you are learning.

Arguably, all three perspectives above recognise that reflective writing requires individuals to be aware of their actions, thoughts and events happening to them and around them, and able to identify how future plans and actions might be approached in a more informed way.

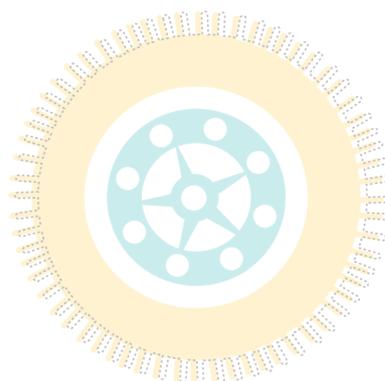
When and where is reflective writing used?

According to Cottrell (2008, p.61), learners may reflect on a more **informal** basis by keeping journals, either personal or professional. Furthermore, other informal reflective practices might include self-evaluation questionnaires, such as those which help identify what kind of learner or team-player you are.

Examples of **formal** reflective writing may include assessed reflective summaries on your professional development or the construction of portfolios. Williams, Woolliams & Spiro, (2012, p.47/8) argue that professional development portfolios might include reports, written reflections on your learning throughout a module, evidence of reading/research and the setting of personal objectives, or professional action points.

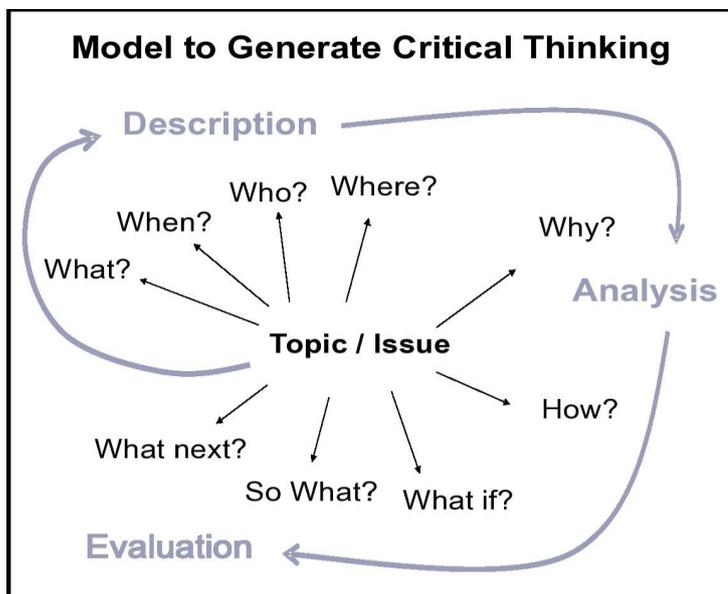
Why is reflective writing increasingly used in higher education in the UK?

- There are various reasons why reflective writing is an increasing component of assessment on academic courses within the UK higher education. Some of these reasons include the following; Reflective writing requires learners to question events and situations around them in more depth, hence such questioning can also develop critical listening, reading and writing skills, all of which are desirable for good academic practice (Monash University, 2007).
- By asking questions of the events and situations around us, we 'generate more considerations upon which we will reflect' (Moon, 1999, p.23). Hence, we begin to analyse, or unpack, our thinking more fully.
- A lot of the situations we are likely to be asked to reflect on will be complex and may not have 'an obvious or immediate solution' (Moon, 2005 cited in Williams, Woolliams and Spiro, 2012, p.2). For example, in an academic context we may be asked to reflect on *working in groups*. By reflecting (or asking questions) on the roles of individuals in the group, including ourselves, and how the group works together (or otherwise), we may explore to what extent the group is working well together to reach an end goal, or not. In light of our conclusions we should then explore in more detail the possible contributing factors to the success or otherwise of the group.



How can our reflective writing be developed?

As reflection requires us to ask questions about ourselves and our thoughts, feelings, actions in and reactions to events and situations, a model of thinking advocated by Plymouth University can be an effective way to develop our skills of reflection.



According to the Plymouth model, by answering the questions within the model we can move our writing beyond being merely descriptive and into a more analytical and evaluative approach.

For example, if you are reflecting on a company visit you might start by giving details of **what** the company is, **where** you went, **who** spoke to you and details of **what** information you received. In addition, you may then reflect on **why** you thought the information was interesting, useful to your studies or inspirational in some way.

You may also reflect on **how** you think the information is linked to relevant theoretical perspectives you have been taught in your modules. Moving on to the final questions in the Plymouth model, these are centred around consequences or implications, therefore, **what might you do next** with the information you received during the company visit? **What action points** for your own personal or professional development might you construct?

References and further reading

- Cottrell, S (2008) *The Study Skills Handbook*. 3rd Edn. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
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