

Reflection vs. Rhetoric: Musings on the Ubiquitous Reflection Paper Assignment

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In 2016 four colleagues and I had the privilege of attending the Association of American Colleges and University's Institute on High Impact Practices. Spurred on by energetic and visionary CTL Director on our campus, we sent in our proposal and were accepted, something I did not know at the time was a "big deal." During the last week of June we flew to Los Angeles and met on the campus of UCLA. Along with enjoying a vacation, I became an initiate into the world of High Impact Practices, which I will shorten to HIPs for this article.

Our task during the week was to design a HIPs program for our campus. While we had a good time—I visiting with friends in Southern California, my younger colleagues sightseeing and enjoying the climate—we also worked hard on the program, which we were expected to present to our cohort at the end of the week. We heard speakers, participated in discussions, and completed reading. We learned all about how HIPs are good for students, especially those from marginalized populations.

By now many in higher education are familiar with the common list of HIPs, although variations of the list, and the order of the practices, do exist:

1. Collaborative Learning
2. Capstone or Signature Experiences
3. First or Freshman Year Seminars or Experiences
4. Diversity/Global Learning (fleshed out in Study Abroad, Study Away, and addressing diversity and global issues in class contexts)
5. Undergraduate Research
6. Internships
7. Common Intellectual Experiences
8. Learning Communities
9. Service Learning
10. Writing Intensive Courses
11. ePortfolios

So far, so good, but in the midst of all of it, I kept asking: what makes a HIP high impact? How does a college instructor know that what she is doing in the listed activity is really going to have a high impact on the students?

The answer came in a list of what are called the Quality Matrices, a list that is hard to find in the HIPs literature but does clarify what is really meant by high impact. Many newcomers to HIPs think, "Well, I let my students work in groups sometimes" or "We have to write five papers in the class" and conclude their teaching uses Collaborative Learning or Writing Intensity. The Quality Matrices describe how these eleven HIPs really look in a class.

- High performance expectation
- Significant investment of student time over an extended period
- Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
- Students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which they are familiar
- Frequently, timely, and constructive feedback
- Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning

- Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
- Public demonstration of competence. (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013)

One may look at this list and feel a parting of the clouds but also a sense of discouragement. While these quality matrices define what a practice like collaborative learning or writing intensivity will really look like in the course of a semester, we realize that most of what we do falls far short of these standards (and meeting all or the majority is theoretically the goal, although perhaps at different levels). We are not using the HIP of collaboratively learning if we break our students into think-pair-share groups two or three times in the semester but assign no long-term tasks that require true collaborative construction of knowledge. We are not holding a writing intensive course just by assigning more writing than usual but are not providing systematic feedback in an accountable way, addressing diversity of opinion, allowing peer input, or meeting other of the matrices.

As a side note, in providing this answer to my question “what makes a HIP high impact?”, this is not to say I did not have other questions, or that HIPs rhetoric does not have its critics. For one, what is meant by high impact on the student? That tends to be measured by self reports on surveys such as the NSSE and by retention data around those students who encounter and complete a certain number of HIPs in their college education.

I have provided this background because this paper exists in the context of HIPs and the sixth quality matrix listed above: Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning. Reflection is held out as a core necessity of experiential learning; reflection hovers around most discussions of experiential learning and HIPs. However, I assert that we have neither a firm grasp on how reflection should be “done” and how the students can learn from reflection nor an understanding of the theoretical reasons for reflection in the first place. Eyler, a scholar of service-learning, stated, “There is reason to believe that reflection gets rather short shrift in typical service-learning experiences. Few studies distinguish among the types of service-learning experience or measure the impact of amount and forms of reflective practice” (2002, p. 520). Either reflection’s origins and theorists are not understood, or its processes are not really applied, or we ask students to reflect in a way that is superficial or simply “evidentiary”, and what I therefore call “rhetorical.”

I would like to explore these three points. If there is a question why I have submitted a paper on this subject to a communication journal, a few words on that. Communication competency is achieved by direct exposure to knowledge in the field, accumulated from literally thousands of years of research, but also by experiences, trial and error, and experimentation, as Dewey would call it (1933). I introduce COMM 1110 students to David Kolb’s (2014) model of learning the first day (Figure 1, following page).

Kolb’s model is a good, simple way to explain to my freshmen on the first day that they will be required to reflect upon each speech they give, in either verbal or written form, and that is one of the ways they will learn. Their reflection will lead them to abstract conclusions about their communication skills, which they will apply in the next speech. As the communication student progresses into service learning, undergraduate research, and internships, the need for reflection grows.

However, do the students truly know how to reflect? At that point in their educations, probably not. We instructors then resort to a series of prompts that are supposed to cause their reflection, but which, realistically, they can often answer in turn without real reflection. These are the training wheels of reflection. Their reflection is, at best, shallow, not the kind where they take responsibility for their learning and go beyond the questions or prompts we give them.

It seems to me that a better approach would be for students throughout their college education to develop a framework, a paradigm, a taxonomy—I am not sure which word is best—which they would fruitfully apply by themselves when asked to reflect, one that would preclude their need to have instructor-given or –driven prompts or direction about what and how they should reflect. Even better, training in reflection as a necessary part of their education should be given early and often.

Figure 1: Kolb's Learning Model (2014)



My ultimate goal in my work on reflection is to create a portable taxonomy of reflection, whether in-action or after-the-fact, that students can be taught. In pursuing that goal, I wish to convince readers there is a problem with our use of the word “reflection” in college teaching, at least the college teaching with which I am familiar. Further, in our assignment of “reflective papers” we are not so much encouraging or guaranteeing reflection from students as we are saying, “Prove to me you reflected in a way that I as the instructor am satisfied with your structure, argument, syntax, and grammar, those aspects of writing I can assess.” But more on that later.

What we lack, however, is such a paradigm or taxonomy, at least not one that is widely known. Such a framework does not have to be universal, but unique to an instructor, although it should include various elements that will be discussed later. First, however, we should notice some contributions of theory and what reflection does in learning.

Theorists on Reflection

John Dewey; Donald A. Schön; Davod Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker; David Kolb; Chris Argyris; Jennifer Moon; and Kathleen Yancey: these are the names one who begins to study reflection in learning will encounter before long. This paper will not go into a long analysis of what each says on the subject. All of us have our own “from the gut” definitions of reflection anyway; there are probably as many definitions as there are people who talk or write about reflection. Unfortunately, this multiplicity of opinions also means there is much to argue about or against. Dewey began the discussion by stating that reflection was:

“ . . . active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (1933, p. 9).

Note that reflection to Dewey is active (as opposed to the passivity we attribute to it as an afterthought of the experience), persistent (not quickly achieved but ongoing), and careful (conscious and in some way procedural).

Dewey went on to add, “The function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious” (1933, p. 100). In other words, reflection starts with a problem. Many of us who have worked in the Communication field for decades will remember in the 1970s and ‘80s that group discussion courses always found at their center the Reflective Thinking Process

- Recognize the problem
- Define the problem.
- Set up criteria for solutions.
- Brainstorm.
- Evaluate brainstormed solutions by the criteria.
- Enact (experiment/pilot if possible)

Monroe’s Motivated Sequence, a popular framework for teaching the persuasive speech, loosely follows the logic of the Reflective Thinking Process in its Attention, Need, Satisfaction, Visualization, and Action framework. However, despite the debt owed to Dewey in bringing reflection on experience into the center of learning, his outcome of a situation that is “clear, coherent, settled, and harmonious,” seems extremely optimistic in a world of complexity and connectivity.

Hatcher & Bringle (1997), writing about reflection in service learning, proposed another definition: “the intentional consideration of experience in light of particular learning objectives” (p. 153). There is merit here, but also a springboard for questions: Whose learning objectives are we talking about? If the student is truly engaged and reflecting, might he have his own learning objectives from the High Impact Practice that differ from the instructor’s? Do the prescribed learning objectives of the instructor supersede what might be the students’ goals in learning? Also, “intentional consideration of experience” implies goal but not method.

One criticism that arises in discussion of reflection in education is that the traditional focus of reflective practice tends to be on the cognitive or intellectual aspects of the reflective process. However, Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) tried to address this deficiency in their model (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Boud, Keogh, and Walker’s iterative model of reflection

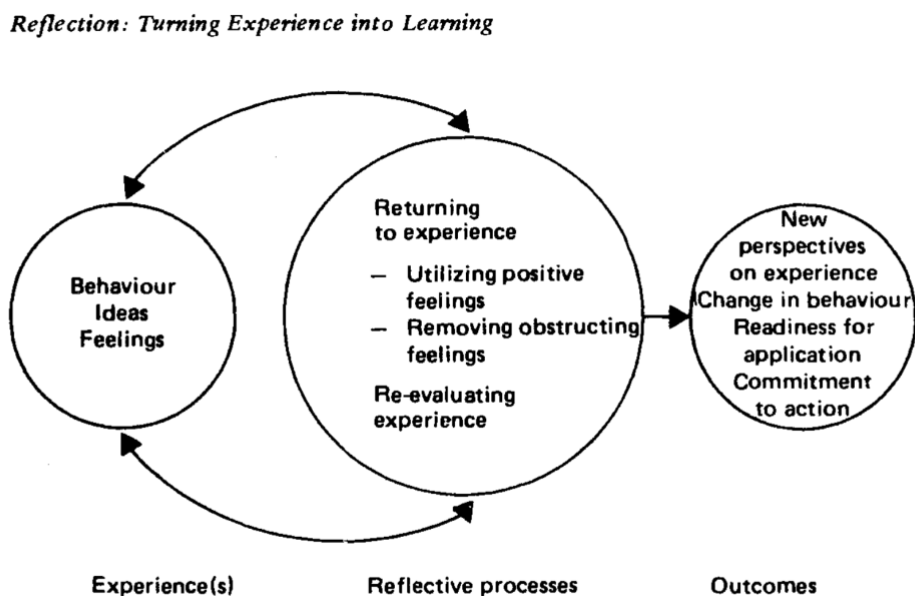


Figure 3 The reflection process in context

One notices that their model mentions “feelings” three times, placing emotions in the forefront of reflection. Feelings, “good” and “bad,” cannot be separated that easily from experience and the process of reflecting on it. The presence, effects, sources, and personal reasons for the feelings one experiences in an “experiential learning” situation are part of the package, not an adjunct. Think of the fears and trepidation a student has going into a collaborative, service-learning, or internship type HIP—or their dread, bravado, the possibility of their failure, or the prediction of its being a waste of time. These are all emotions our students and we instructors have.

Boud, Keogh, and Walker’s (1985) model also pictures the iterative nature of reflection; in fact, one wonders how reflection can be of any value if it does not loop back on itself, a process that takes time. In this looping, the learner considers, either separately or together, actions (what was done), ideas (especially in relation to classroom content), and feelings. These authors also point out that even listening to a lecture is “an experience.” Since no college instructor is immune from some lecture, and since many of us have been made to feel guilt for using lecture, this is a happy reminder. We know lecture is a method of teaching has limitations, but it is not evil, unethical, passive, pointless, lazy, or any of those extreme adjectives people have used to be provocative or sell books.

Schön (1984), and others have written a great deal on reflection as accompanying experience in distinction from reflection as an activity done afterward: Reflection-in-action contrasted with reflection-on-action. Reflection as we are discussing it here, as a necessary part of the High Impact learning experience, is not the same as William Wordsworth’s often-quoted statement about poetry: “It is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” Reflection, as Boud, Keogh, and Walker showed, is iterative; as Dewey wrote, it is active and persistent. The question is, when does the iterative, persistent, and active process begin? One might argue that if the learner is not reflecting-in-action, that is, during the experiential event, how well can she reflect later? Reflection-in-action might even be tied to mindfulness practice in the vein of Suzanne Langer’s work. Schön and colleague Argyris (1974) also explain reflection as a way or means to align one’s “espoused theories” (what we say we believe or even believe what we believe) with our actions (theories in use). In all these cases, reflection demands personal honesty, attention, intentionality, and understanding of a process.

Although I could go on with further definitions and theoretical models and viewpoints on reflection, I will end this section with two observations. First, while there is a body of empirical research about reflection, it is not as strong as it could be, I imagine because reflection is hard to quantify, observe, and locate in an experiment. That does not mean it is an amorphous nothing, and I do not want to be understood as saying there is no good research on reflection as a learning process. There are just far more “big idea” approaches than actual empirical studies. Second, we do not do a good job of explaining to students early in their careers how they learn from reflection, perhaps because we do not understand it. The value and place of reflection should perhaps be an integral part of professional development in colleges among new and veteran faculty.

How Should Students (Or Anyone) Reflect

Secondly, I would like to move to the subject of a process of reflection for students to learn and apply across disciplines, what I call a taxonomy of reflection. Vos and Cowan (2009) suggest the use of Bloom’s taxonomy in this regard. I believe that is a good starting point; students should at least be well versed in the (revised Krathwohl and Anderson version of) Bloom’s taxonomy (Figure 3) early in their freshman experience. I advocate teaching this to freshmen because it will define for them the essence of how high school and college are different as well as how their college instructors are attempting to move them “up the ladder” through various types of assignments and experiences. It can also be a baseline for teaching a reflective process.

Figure 3: Krathwohl and Anderson Taxonomy of Learning (2001)



As such, reflection starts with remembering. Reflection cannot continue or be strong without a strong foundation of remembering where facts, emotions, actions, reactions, etc. are recalled in detail and not just in broad silhouettes or “hitting the high points” of the experience. This part of the reflection process must be given time for details, in order and in context, to be recalled. For many, such remembering is synonymous with writing. While I myself reflect mostly through writing pages upon pages, journaling is not everyone’s strong suit. Some might only jot key ideas; some might draw in addition to using words, and some process better by self-talk or in dialogue with others. Some need only solitude and time. However, without adequate time and attention to remembering, the rest of the taxonomy, pictured here as a pyramid, will not have a strong foundation.

People like me, the writers, tend to think the writing method is the purest form of reflection—it can be done in private with no input from others, it requires moving impressions from one part of the brain to higher ones where language rules and where order, syntax, and grammar matter, and it would be in permanent form. A picture might be worth a thousand words, but a thousand words might also be better than a picture at times. However, reflection does not inherently demand writing. What demands writing, at least in higher education, is the common “reflective paper” we assign.

After the strong foundation of remembering, of pulling up the materials of reflection, we then must understand the experience, and even more, ourselves in the midst of that experience. This is where more current scholars of reflection focus—in the internal world as well as the external, “objective” world. Typically, we read that “Reflection should cause us to question our assumptions.” What was right, wrong, or incomplete, about our thinking, knowledge, or attitudes before going into the experience? What did we assume that was not questioned before, that we took for granted, had not even realized might be there? What might we still be assuming that needs questioning?

It is at this point of my task of describing a possible taxonomy of reflection that I find myself trying to develop a series of questions or queries that might lead us to more remembering and understanding. Yet, I hesitate. Perhaps our depending on a series of prescribed questions per se might lead us back to the original problem: we provide students prompts for addressing the reflective task for a paper, yet are we the instructors exerting too much control over that reflection? We want students to reflect on their learning on the basis of their own initiative, volition, power, and creativity. We want them to internalize a systematic but flexible reflective process. Should such guidelines that they internalize be broad and flexible, or specific and proscriptive? We might, in an assignment, want them to entertain more specific questions for our own purposes, but I think most of us would prefer the broad and flexible approach for a tool the students can carry through life.

These first two steps in Krathwohl and Anderson revision of Bloom—remembering and understanding—make the rest of the reflection process possible. Students can then apply their new knowledge of self and situation to other problems or circumstances; they can see parts and patterns in a broader range of experiences, approaches, people, and challenges. They can thus evaluate the effectiveness of such, keeping in mind that all this reflection and in-world experience (of the service learning, collaboration, or internship) is being fed by readings, lectures, discussions, and supports in the classroom.

Two points here. First, I do not mean to present Krathwohl and Anderson as usurpers of Bloom's original work. Krathwohl was actually Bloom's colleague in the original model (Wilson, 2016). Second, I also do not mean to infer that this common taxonomy is the end-all and be-all of reflective taxonomies or paradigms. I only offer it as a starting point that might be easily adapted for students to guide their reflection, but I would hope, one, that they would develop more sophistication in reflection, and two, that an instructor could develop his or her own model.

The Problem of the Reflective Paper

So I arrive at the climax of my argument. What do we really want out of students when we assign them to "reflect" on either the material in a text or, more to the point here, a High Impact Practice in which they have been engaged? I wish to look at this from a positive and then more critical viewpoint.

First, I think first we want honesty. We may not always like a response from students that shows their experience was not what we hoped it would be for them, but we have to accept it. Reflection without honesty is not reflection, only an exercise in pleasing the instructor, giving the instructor what she wants, and heaven knows the students have had enough of that in their formal education. Last year one of our Communication majors did an internship with our Athletic Department. A nontraditional student, he and I both expected it to be very helpful and a good match for him. It was not, for a number of reasons. Students before him had loved that placement and thrived; he was rather ho-hum about it. I could hardly say, "You need to go back and reflect some more until you can find something really positive to say about it in this final reflection paper, because, doggone it, this internship was supposed to be valuable to you!"

Secondly, I think we want to see a process, some time spent, some earnestness and effort in the reflective task. Third, we want to see positive affective and cognitive outcomes at some level, and fourth, we want to see relevance to and congruence with the disciplinary subject tied to the experience. We want that all-purpose word, critical thinking, too—that the student takes some theory or factual material from the classwork and makes the connections between the experience and the abstractions. It may be that their experience supports or does not support the class material, but we want to see them in the act of building those bridges.

All that said, we have high hopes for reflection, but let me argue the other side. Reflection is first not bound by time (or paper length); reflection can go on for many hours, days, months, or longer. Reflection is painful, especially if we give room to the emotional aspects and allow honesty. Reflection

may tell us more about ourselves than we want to know, especially when we honestly question our assumptions (never fun, and one of the parts of reflection I find most painful because it usually leads me to conclude I was fully or partially wrong about something for a long time). And most of all, reflection is not neat or pretty.

So, we assign a reflective paper, and we expect it to be organized into a standard academic paper (introduction, thesis, three or four major arguments or supporting ideas, and a conclusion), a particular length, grammatically correct, tied to theory or class material, and neatly presented. And why are the students writing it? To **prove** to the instructor that either, or both: 1. They have reflected to the extent that the instructor wants (an ambiguous task), and 2. They have learned whatever it was they should have learned (also ambiguous). To add to the ambiguity, the students have not been taught a method or taxonomy of reflection or even what are the theoretical and empirical reasons for using reflection in the first place after a service project, collaboration, job shadow, or internship.

Do you see the problem here?

The concept of a reflective paper assumes that the reflective process can be neatly packaged into a rhetorical document whose goal is to convince the instructor that something has been learned or accomplished. It is not a written version of the reflection process, and it is often, or at least not necessarily, evidence of real reflection, especially if specific, targeted prompts have been presented as what the student is supposed to address. This set of prompts stands as opposed to an earnest thought process that might have been arduous, self-critical, emotional, frustrating, or on the other hand, satisfying and revelatory.

So, what are my suggestions?

First, educate students on reflection: the whys, whens, wherefores, and whats of it.

Second, allow them to reflect in their own ways, on their own terms, but still proving it. They could record visually or audio, they could keep a journal, even with some doodlings (if it does help some students express themselves verbally) and collect that as proof of the process. If assessment is needed, have them write an explanation of how they reflected, and they will then be using metacognition. Third, still assign reflective papers—definitely—but call them something else, such as “Evidence of learning after experience and reflection” papers. Call them a lab report. Just do not confuse a paper designed to prove to an instructor that they got something out of an experience with reflection.

Conclusion

I come to this as an advocate of the Transparency in Learning and Teaching movement. Although there is great value in plopping students down in the middle of ill-defined problems, clarity in explaining what you are going to assess them on is a different matter. Depending on the level of student, make clear what you expect in this “evidence of learning” paper we have commonly called a reflection paper so that they are struggling with the ideas, the problems, and the solutions, not with assignment expectations.

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