

Mirror, Mirror On the Wall:
Confessions of a Reflective Practitioner

We use mirrors in our lives each and every day. In fact, our day typically begins by staring into the mirror as part of our grooming routine. We observe something - namely our self and our appearance. We quite literally make an observation that impacts us over the next few minutes in a number of ways. We may or may not like what we see - either at a superficial level of appearance or at a deeper level of identity. We may make assumptions about what we see - we might see someone with confidence, wisdom, and experience, or someone who is merely getting old and wrinkled. The inspection process may reveal things that need attention - hair out of place, a blemish on the skin, stubble on the chin. We have an image and then we use our imagination to respond. We have some knowledge on how to attend to those things we notice staring back at us. Some times we make an informed, strategic decision on what to do and what to use while other times we act automatically with little or no thought to the act. We might be reminded of a new product or lifestyle activity that could be of use so we make a conscious decision to obtain those things as a response to what has been seen in the mirror. This entire meta-analysis essentially consists of 4 steps: looking, knowing, feeling, and behaving. In this context, the reflection is centered on our own identity. And, the general process is not limited to the morning routine in our bathroom.

After grooming, we get into our car and propel ourselves to a destination. We are, quite literally, on a journey. The journey is not, however, restricted to merely looking ahead through the windshield to see where we're going. Included in our travels is glancing up to the rear-view mirror to see what's behind us. We look to the side mirrors

to see what is moving along beside us and to perhaps reveal a blind spot that was not visible from the rearview mirror on the windshield or the peripheral vision as we turn our heads, giving us a new perspective. We take what we perceive and what is revealed to us to make informed decisions as how to proceed down the road. This information ensures our safety. We may even see something and have no idea of what it is. We make look up and see red lights flashing, evoking a rush of emotions that dictate our behavior to pull over. In this context, the reflection process quite literally helps make meaning of our place in the environment.

Most of us would never think of starting the day or driving a car without looking into the mirror. Clearly, looking into the mirror influences us in a myriad of ways as the physics and process of reflection provides information, evokes feelings that in turn, shape how we behave and use information to make those decisions. Yet, much of the existing paradigm of shallow educational experiences rarely includes this process. It is like walking down the sidewalk downtown in a rush to arrive at a destination and catching a fleeting glimpse of our selves reflected in store window. We see it, but know, feel, and do little about what we have observed. These same dynamics are often found on the educational journeys that take place in the classroom. Why then, do we barrel down the educational journey with little or no attention paid to "looking in the mirror" to get a sense of where we are and what surrounds us? It is because the educational experience of teaching and learning has been reduced to the act of disseminating and accumulating discrete facts. Reflection is an overt and intentional process in deeper education and service-learning. We create the opportunity and provide methods to look and see what bounces back to us.

That said, I have to be honest. When I stumbled into service-learning, I was reluctant about this reflection business. I had my own preconceived notions of what reflection was. Today, I jokingly confess that reflection sounded a lot like group hugs, balloon bouquets, and rounds of singing Kumbaya. And like many of my colleagues, I also thought that "wasting" time on reflection would take away important class time. That is really just another way of saying it would cut into my lecture time and role as "sage on the stage." My initial misgivings revealed many things, including my own misunderstandings and insecurities.

Once I saw the pedagogical potential of service-learning, I was eager to try it. And based on my very cursory understanding of it, I knew it meant incorporating reflection. I entered into my initial experimentation with great trepidation and little skill. After all, how difficult could "leading a discussion" or assigning a journal passage be? I dutifully set aside class time and then asked my students to "reflect" on their experiences. The silence was deafening. They knew no more on how to begin than I did. After what seemed an eternity, one brave student would inquire, "What do you mean? About what?"

It gets worse. I also tried using reflection journals in my first service-learning class. As in the case of class discussions, the students were as confused and generally clueless about what they were to write as I was. I was naively optimistic that changing from an oral format to a written format would be more effective. In hindsight, I now realize the exercise was essentially attempting reflection for the sake of reflection, resulting in two types of journal entries. One, and the most common, is what I refer to as the "Dear Diary" approach. Students' journal entries were nothing more than shallow

reports of their experience, much like recording a day's events in their personal diaries. Typically, their entries were limited to one or two sentences reporting, "Today I tutored a kid in the after school program – it was really neat" with subsequent entries like, "I'm still tutoring the same kid and it's still really neat." Clearly, my students did not know what they were to reflect on let alone why they were reflecting. This is not their fault as it became evident that I had done a poor job in articulating the topic and purpose of the exercise. However, some students attempted to "psych out" the professor to at least provide what they thought I wanted. That led to the second most common journal entry style I have come to characterize as "warbling." Students assumed I wanted to read what a life-changing experience their service-learning had been. Unlike the one to two perfunctory "Dear Diary" sentences, the warbling would often cover pages and pages of sentimental testimonials of how they would "never be the same" after this amazing experience. Uh, huh. But what did they learn?

I realized I didn't really know what reflection was nor did I know how to go about using it. Luckily, I had the Bennion Center as a resource and I quickly sought technical support. I was given and referred to several articles or books on the subject. I quickly realized that much of the literature came from the "hard sciences" which contradicted my assumptions that reflection was a "touchy feely" activity. I read the work of Donald Schoen from M.I.T. describing the reflective practitioner (1983) and of Kolb and Fry (1975). Both characterized reflection as a deliberate process to analyze both process and outcome of scientific inquiry. In perusing the other materials provided by the Bennion Center, the most useful and succinct definition of reflection came from two scholars who would eventually become colleagues of mine, Bob Bringle and Julie

Hatcher. They simply defined this complex process as, the intentional consideration of an experience in light of instructional objectives (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Two key concepts stood out of their useful definition: intentional consideration and instructional objectives. The former made me realize I had approached the act of reflecting in a very “loosy goosy” manner. The latter was a critical revelation as I discovered reflecting for the sake of reflecting was not very productive or meaningful. Instead, the act of intentional consideration had to be linked to something I wanted students to learn. While reviewing the literature I had been provided, I soon realized that reflection was not the “fluff” I presumed it was. Instead, it was theoretically grounded, which resonated with me as a scholar.

Theoretical Frameworks

Schoen (1995) talked of reflection-in-action using the simple and familiar example of an athlete viewing video recordings of a game to analyze their actions to determine why it was or wasn't effective. Schoen (1983) likened reflection to having students moving up and down a series of ladder rungs with a scholar or research acting as a coach, guiding the student along the way. The first “step” was taken in research and before taking the next, one would reflect on what did or didn't transpire at that step before moving on to the next step. The student would verbalize what they observed and thought with guidance from the instructor. The process was repeated over and over as the student and scholar moved up each subsequent rung on the ladder while they co-created new scientific and empirical knowledge.

Likewise, Kolb (1984) articulated the importance and integration of reflection within various steps of learning. A learner takes a concrete experience and considers

what was observed during that experience. Based on that reflection, the individual thinks about the meaning of the experience and creates an abstract conceptualization of what has occurred. This, in turn, allows the learner to actively apply what has been learned.

It is easy to see why and how this type of thought appealed to social scientists and educators like John Dewey. He recognized the value of contemplating experience as it relates to an individual's growth, not only cognitively, but in their development as citizens in a democratic society.

Reflection can also be used to help us grow spiritually, emotionally, and cognitively. In his book entitled, *What Thoreau Said: Walden and the Unsayable*, William Johnson suggested that Walden Pond was a literary vehicle (if not solely a metaphor) for personal reflection. Walden Pond essentially became a mirror for Thoreau to peer into. Ultimately I came to realize how reflection is conducted or how it looks is not nearly as important as WHY it is used. Reflection helps us see something we might not otherwise have seen.

Over time and with study, it became apparent that reflection can be a very effective learning and teaching tool whether in a service-learning course or traditional class. Reflection can also be used with groups to promote unity and a sense of community. It can be a written exercise or part of a dialogue. Reflection can be a formal process or an informal, almost spontaneous process. I essentially discovered there is no single or "right" way to conduct reflection. With some experimentation, I've developed and modified various reflection methods. I have even conducted research on reflection. The remainder of this chapter is a description and account of where, when, and how I've used these reflection techniques.

Objectives and Formats

I have come to realize there are various objectives to reflection. For most academics, the most familiar purpose for reflection is to facilitate students' cognitive understanding of course content. This addresses the "What?" or "head" component of the triadic structure of deeper education. Reflection can also promote students' personal growth in other areas such as their identity and role in society. This can often be a deep and profound revelation to students which encompasses the "heart" or "So what?" dimension of deeper learning. Lastly, reflection can facilitate students' application of new ideas and skills as they ponder their actions throughout the learning experience to incorporate the "hands" or "Now what?" aspect of deeper education. Therefore, the objectives of reflection can be multi-faceted creating a bridge between the cognitive aspects of learning and the application of new knowledge or skills through action.

The formats and methods to conduct reflection are varied. Most instructors I have interacted with conceptualize reflection as written responses in journals. This is certainly a traditional approach, but it can be overwhelming in a class with a large enrollment. There are other written formats that can be incorporate in class as well as out of class. Written reflection can be highly structured and deliberate or a brief and spontaneous stream of consciousness. Conversely, reflection can take place through discussion and dialogue. This can sometimes be a challenge with large groups, but there are efficient and engaging methods that can be used. Oral reflection can take place in dyads or small groups.

Eyler (2000) provided a useful "map" to help faculty members plan and conduct reflection. She noted that reflection can occur before, during, and after an experience.

Reflection can be conducted on an individual basis as well as with and by classmates and even community partners. Mixing reflection formats and objectives accommodates a range of students' learning styles. One method allows a quiet, introverted student an opportunity to be meaningfully engaged during an in-class discussion. Another method affords analytic students to carefully and deliberately contemplate their experience in writing. The following are my personal favorite reflection strategies, but they certainly are not an exhaustive or complete list. They have been shared with colleagues through workshops. The methods presented here are tried and true as well as "user-friendly" for both the student and instructor. They can be mixed and matched with each other. Some of these are my own creation; others are modifications or hybrid approaches adapted from a very useful workbook by Eyer, Giles, and Schmiede (1996). Many colleagues have "tweaked" these methods to make them uniquely their own, while others have flatly and outright rejected them for one reason or another. Instructors can make informed decisions based on instructional objectives when and how to use or combine various reflection methods. The important key here is to use reflection as a learning and teaching tool for intentional consideration of an experience in light of instructional objectives. Reflection is not done for the sake of reflection. The process is a deliberate, contemplative exploration of cognitive content from the class, whether it employs service-learning or not.

Pre-reflection

This technique is both remarkably simple and useful. I use pre-reflection as a preface to all of my courses and workshops. By having students ponder or consider a topic or statement prior to the discussion, they are activating their own prior knowledge,