Designing Critical Reflections

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Suggestions for Promoting High-Quality Reflective Assignments

For Effective Planning

- Align your prompts with your specific course goals and themes.
- Prompt cultural and affective learning in addition to purely cognitive/academic learning.
- Give prompts as far in advance as possible - because knowing what they'll be asked to think about helps guide students' experiences.
- Provide prompts in writing (if possible) so students are sure of your meaning.

For Effective Prompting

- Repeatedly ask some of the same targeted questions (in order to give students practice in the type of thinking you're looking for and remind them of the course objectives).
- Ask students to make connections – to theories, readings, and/or other day's experiences.
- Design an end-of-term task that requires students to look back at and actually use their previous entries so they can become more aware of their learning and growth.
- Use questions shown to promote effective discussions[1]:
  - o <u>Divergent</u> = lend themselves to more than one good answer
  - o <u>Higher level</u> = related to analysis, synthesis, or evaluation on Bloom's taxonomy
  - o <u>Straightforward</u> = clearly expressed
  - o <u>Structured</u> = not totally wide open (i.e. not "What do you think?" but suggesting a direction like "what are some similarities or differences between X and Y"?)
- Pose problems for which there is not a clear solution, even among experts.
- Provide opportunities for students to consider the fundamental question, "What have I learned?"

For Effective Evaluation and Feedback

- Give early feedback so students understand what good reflections look like.
- Provide models of exemplary reflections (ideally not the longest but the best thinking).
- Design a straightforward/efficient method of evaluation.
- If you will be using a rubric, give it to students before they do their reflections so they know you'll be looking for.
- Borrow ideas for effective reflection prompts from colleagues.

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[1] John D.W. Andrews, "The Verbal Structure of Teacher Questions: Its Impact on Class Discussion," *POD Quarterly: The Journal of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education*, Paper 32 (1980).

What is Critical Reflection?

Reflection is "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends."[2]

- John Dewey

Critical reflection "<u>generates</u> learning (articulating questions, confronting bias, examining causality, contrasting theory with practice, pointing to systemic issues), <u>deepens</u> learning (challenging simplistic conclusions, inviting alternative perspectives, asking 'why' iteratively), and <u>documents</u> learning (producing tangible expressions of new understandings for evaluation)."[3]

- Sarah Ash and Patti Clayton

Reflection is a form of mental processing "applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. …[It] is the mulling over of ideas that have already been learned – the reorganizing of them – the considering of how, for example, what has been learned will…improve practice."[4]

- Jennifer Moon

"Reflection is intellectual work that differs from the dominant academic culture by intentionally engaging the whole person, connecting experiences with academic content and cultivating students' awareness of themselves.

- Experiential Learning Office, Ryerson University

What should faculty be aiming to do?

A synthesis[5] of some studies suggests that successful reflective prompts do the following things:

- Meet specific learning objectives
- Occur regularly
- Fit the context
- Connect and/or integrate
- Challenge
- Spur and are assessed in terms of critical thinking
- Help clarify values or generate change or action in the learner's life.

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[2] Quoted in Janet E. Dyment and Timothy S. O'Connell, "Assessing the quality of reflection in student journals: a review of the research" *Teaching in Higher Education* 16(1): 81-97.

[3] Sarah L. Ash and Patti H. Clayton, "Generating, Deepening, and Documenting Learning: The Power of Critical Reflection in Applied Learning, *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education* 1 (Fall 2009): 34.

[4] Jennifer Moon, "Using Reflective Learning to Improve the Impact of Short Courses and Workshops" *Journal of Continuing Education in Health Professions* 24 (1): 4-11.

[5] Adapted from Ash and Clayton, "Generating, Deepening, and Documenting Learning."