**Strategies for engaging students in critical reflection**

**What is critical reflection?**

Critical reflection will help students get the most from their learning experiences, from a teamwork assignment through to a formal work placement or an activity that didn’t work out.

Students need to learn how to challenge their conscious and unconscious values, beliefs and assumptions. Fisher (2010, p. 321) defines these as follows:

* ***Values*** constitute principles to live by, i.e. what is important to the individual (e.g. living in harmony with nature);
* ***Beliefs*** indicate a particular understanding of the way the world works, i.e. what the individual thinks is “true” (e.g. human beings depend on the environment);
* ***Assumptions*** reflect premises or understandings that underpin values and beliefs, i.e. what the individual takes for granted (e.g. I can think rationally about my relationship with nature).

**Why engage students in critical reflection?**

The purpose of reflection is to learn from an experience. Critical reflection enables all aspects of an experience to be taken into account so that opportunities for learning are maximised. By reflecting critically, we can better understand how our thinking and behaviour enables or constrains our own practice, and the practice of others.

Critical reflection is a vital aspect of our self- and career-development throughout our studies and careers. Here are some of the reasons.

* Critical reflection underpins the self- and career-related identity work needed to conceptualise, create and sustain work that has meaning to us as individuals.
* Critical reflection helps us to make sense of our learning and experiences so that we can maximise the benefits.
* By looking for insights and maximising self-awareness, critical reflection contributes to our personal, professional and social identity.
* By adopting critical reflection as an intrinsic component of work and life, we can make more informed decisions about our futures. This fosters continuous improvement and enhances our access to new opportunities.

**How to incorporate these into a module or unit**

The strategies included in this resource help students to make sense of their learning and align it with the future. Depending on the nature of the task, students can choose which template they find most useful. Where choice is given, ask students to explain why they have chosen a specific template and why it is the most appropriate for a given task. Add the introductory page each time the strategies are shared with students. Require the strategies to be used for EVERY reflective task: for example, reflective writing or presentations, reports, journals and diaries, reflections, portfolio entries or blogs. Insist that students always try to relate what they have done to their future work and learning. Students are directed to examples of reflective writing [here](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/fch/work-experience/reflective-writing-guidance.pdf), in a resource from Pete Watton, Jane Collings and Jenny Moon at the University of Exeter (2001).

**How to introduce critical reflection and reflexivity to students**

**Critical reflection**

“Critical reflection is concerned with the why, the reasons for, and the consequences of what we do rather than the how or the how to of action (Mezirow, 1990, in Waring & Evans, 2015, p. 162).

**Reflexivity**

“Reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others”. (Bolton, 2010, p. 13).

**Key pointers**

* Emphasis needs to be on interpretation rather than pure description;
* Reflections need to be clear and succinct, clarifying your role in the initiative and what the golden nuggets are that you are exploring.
* Encourage students to challenge their beliefs / presuppositions, and what these are founded on.
* Ideas need to be accessible. Emphasise that students’ ideas should translate clearly to those outside of their context or discipline if they are writing for a wider audience. If the reflections are purely for themselves and not for sharing, students need to add sufficient detail to be able to revisit the work in the future.
* Ask students to provide clear evidence to support their analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of events. For example, in describing an event that may have been uncomfortable and/or challenging it is useful to ask students to focus on not just the ‘what of the situation’ but also the ‘why.’ The narrative should give a clear description of the facts, how the author felt and why, other possible alternative interpretations of the event, ways to move forward………..

(See Chapter 10, Waring and Evans, 2015)

**Key Steps in Critical Reflection** (**Adapted from Fook, White and Gardner (2006).**

Use these four steps to guide students, perhaps asking them to work through a couple of examples.

***STEP 4***

**reworking of conceptsand practice based on re-evaluation**

**(confirmatory – no change/ transformational – seeing things differently**

**STEP 3**

**Reviewing and re-evaluating assumptions according to relevant criteria – alternative perspectives**

**(depending on context and purpose etc.)**

**STEP 2**

**Exploring where assumptions have come from**

**(personal, emotional, social, cultural, historical, political)**

**STEP 1**

**Examining Assumptions underpinning actions and reactions**

**(cognitive ,emotional, experiential, metacognitive**)

**How do I evaluate a critical reflection?**

There are many approaches that can be used to evaluate critically reflective practice. The work of Watton, Collings, and Moon, (2001) drawing on Kolb’s (1984), Gibbs’ 1988), and Bloom’s (1964) research is a useful starting point.

**Assessing reflective writing**

The aim of critically reflective activities is to move from description to thoughtful analysis of a context. Critical reflection enables us to explore a context from different perspectives, and to examine our own reactions and beliefs and values to both confirm and/or change our position.

The table below identifies key characteristics of critically reflective writing that can be used in developing explicit assessment criteria.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Process** | **Evidence: examples of what we would be looking for** |
| **SCENE SETTING**  **Description of event**  **Recall of information**  **Demonstration of understanding** | Is the context clear?  Is a clear summary given of the specific area of focus?  Is the issue/event clearly framed as to what it is the individual is looking at and why? |
| **EXAMINING & EXPLORING ASSUMPTIONS**  **Regulation of emotions Expression of feelings**  **Self- awareness**  **Exploration of feelings – Consideration of motives** | Are feelings and reactions to events explored?  Are reasons for reactions considered?  Is there exploration of the hows and whys of the event?  Is there exploration of beliefs and values, understanding of how these have been formed, and how they impact reactions? |
| **REVIEWING AND REEVALUATING**  **Seeking alternative viewpoints** | Is there evidence of exploration of alternative perspectives (literature; colleagues; online etc.)?  Is there a willingness and acknowledgement of alternative perspectives of the event?  Is there exploration of the reasons behind one’s opinions? |
| **Synthesis**  **Linking** | Is there evidence of an ability to pull all the strands of the incident/episode together?  Is there evidence of looking at connections/similarities and differences with previous events? |
| **Perspective / Reflexivity**  **Deliberation** | Is there an ability to step back from the situation and look at the incident from alternative perspectives?  A willingness to consider how others might see and be impacted by the situation?  Evidence of re-evaluation of situation. |
| **REWORKING vs REINFORCEMENT OF PRACTICE: Resolution, Evaluation, Criticality** | Is there evidence of coming to a conclusion about the incident and key lessons learnt?  Any evidence of development of new insights? |
| **Learning Points**  **Self-knowledge**  **Knowledge of context**  **Action Plan** | Is what has been learnt about the self and the context evident?  What questions does the reflection raise for the author?  Has it confirmed or changed the individual’s viewpoint?  Is the writer clear about what remains problematic?  Is it clear what is being taken forward? |

**Further reading**

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