

# Reflective practice

## For Education students

Education courses frequently require students to engage in reflective tasks to help them evaluate their own values and practices. This process can assist them in improving their teaching practice.

### **What is reflective practice?**

Reflective practice can be seen as analysing, reconsidering and questioning experiences within a context (e.g. learning theories). For example, students sometimes find that the realities of their practicum experiences don't match what they may have learned from theories about teaching and learning. The process of reflecting on the disparities between your expectations and actual experience enables you to become more engaged with the process of your own learning (Moon, 1999).

Reflective practice also enables teachers to recognize the authority of their own teaching experiences (including how students respond to their teaching). Teachers should for example think about what they have learned from their teaching experiences, and re-evaluate these experiences 'to see them in new ways that might suggest new practices' (Russell, 1999).

### **Writing reflectively**

Whereas most academic writing tasks require you to support your main points with references to the literature, or to current practice, reflective writing involves recording your own personal views, impressions or observations.

However, it should be more than simply a *description* of your observations or thoughts. It also involves evaluating such experiences, thinking about the strengths and limitations of theory or practice, and linking them with what you have learned from your coursework and reading.



Reflective writing is often simple and direct. Personal pronouns *I* and *we* can be used as you are reflecting on *your own* personal experiences or perceptions. Often, the assessment for a reflective piece of writing may include criteria such as 'the ability to express and justify a personal position on...'

## Reflecting on Practicum experiences

Education students are commonly asked to write reflectively during a practicum. In the example below the student was asked to reflect upon the learning outcomes from a particular unit of classroom work. The reflection led to the understanding that improved outcomes could have been achieved if the task had been approached differently. Thus, through the process of reflection and evaluation, this student extended her learning and understanding of the relationship between teaching practices and learning outcomes.

*'Learning outcomes may have been enhanced had we further unpacked and challenged people's preconceptions before presenting them with new information. It would have been useful to assess not only students' prior knowledge about...but also the attitudes and values that influenced these views because...'*

The following reflective response by a teacher of a physics class reveals both the teacher's discomfort at not being fully in control of the experiment being conducted, and his realization that the students, by engaging in a process of trial and error, were learning by discovery. This realization subsequently changed his approach to teaching physics.

I vowed to provide them with as little guidance as possible...since they would be responsible for writing up their own methods. It was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. My every impulse was to point out errors and make suggestions as they performed their experiments around the classroom. Instead, I just walked around and made sure that they weren't totally lost. Frustration levels were high...I expect that their frustration was due to the fact that I did not hand out a piece of paper that said 'Laboratory Instructions'. I was amazed at the diligence with which they worked...[and]...kept going with their labs.

Adapted from <http://educ.queensu.ca/~russellt/howteach/reflect.htm>

## Reflecting on your learning

You may also be asked to respond reflectively to the literature, to reflect on what you have learnt from a course, or to reflect on your personal philosophy of teaching or what you consider to be important teaching and learning principles. For example, the following reflective task is open ended and requires you to understand theoretical knowledge about language, and how this relates on a practical level both to language taught in the classroom and to what has been learned through this process:

*What knowledge about language have you have been able to bring to consciousness through this unit?*

In response the student has chosen to reflect on the cultural and disciplinary conventions of language and how much we take for granted in our everyday communication with others.

*'...Most of the time, the languages we encounter are meaningful but this unit reminded me that language relies on shared cultural and disciplinary conventions. Lacking knowledge of such conventions precludes understanding. I do not understand, for example,...'*

You may also be required to reflect on more specific knowledge you have learned during the course. For example, the following task requires the student to demonstrate understanding of linguistic features and then to reflect upon how this knowledge can be practically implemented in the classroom to assist teaching and learning:

*Reflect on how this new knowledge about the structures and functions of spoken language may help in your own teaching.*

*'The meta language introduced and the concepts defined in this unit will be extremely useful to my teaching and lesson planning in both English and SOSE. In particular, I will use the framework of 'lexicon, syntax and discourse' to produce a simple check list when thinking about a text's appropriateness for a particular class and activities relating to it...'*

In this response the student has focused on a particular aspect of meta language, the framework of 'lexicon, syntax and discourse.' She then goes on to demonstrate, with specific examples, how this framework could be used to evaluate the appropriateness of a text for use in the classroom.

The following questions may be a helpful starting point for you to begin the process of reflective practice.

### **Practicum Experiences**

#### ***Schools***

- Did the 'reality' match the theory or lecture material?
- Did I learn anything new about curriculum issues, classroom management techniques, formulation of school policies, approaches to learning and teaching?
- Were individual differences catered for?
- Were there any problematic situations?
- What did I expect would happen?

#### ***Early childhood settings***

- Which curriculum approach was used at this centre?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
- To what extent was the program limited by time/staff/space constraints?
- Did the staff advocate for the children in their care?
- Did I notice any examples of particularly good (or poor) practice?

#### **The research literature**

- Based on my practicum experience, and other readings, to what extent do I agree with a particular proposal/approach/theory?
- Is it practical to implement in terms of resources, time constraints and Australian context?
- How sound is the study's rationale? Are the results conclusive?

#### **What have I learned from the course?**

- How has my understanding of children changed?
- Have my ideas about teaching children changed as a result of my coursework and practical experience? How?
- What have I learned about myself as a learner and my ability to deal with children, staff and parents?

## **References:**

Moon, J. (1999). *Learning journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.

Russell, T (1999) Faculty of Education, Queens University, Kingston Ontario. *Reflective practice* <http://educ.queensu.ca/~ar/>, Retrieved June 29,2005