

Learning Bytes: Session 6: Wed 21 October, 12:15-13:15

How can we get students to reflect more effectively on their learning?

The session comprised a series of presentations by the following people:

- Sue Taylor and Mary Dyer, Lecturers in Early Years' Education, School of Education and Professional Development
- Pat Hill, Academic Skills Tutor, Music, Humanities and Media
- Rowan Bailey, Academic Skills Tutor, School of Art, Design and Architecture
- Joanne Blake, Senior Lecturer, the Business School
- Julie Wilkinson, European and overseas Recruitment Manager, School of Computing and Engineering

Sue Taylor and Mary Dyer (SEPD)

Sue and Mary work in early years' education where reflective practice is a key component of the Government's requirements for early years' practitioners. However, this is proving to be less than straightforward, as students don't necessarily always have the skills to reflect. Previous reflective practice tended to be based around 'critical incidence' – the identification of a particular problem but this was felt to focus on and reinforce negativity. Having tried an alternative approach which was also problematic Sue and Mary decided to do some research across both years of the Foundation degree. They found that in:

- Year 1 the reflection was very often focussed on 'self' e.g. did I plan effectively, did it go well with implications for staff/colleagues, children, parents as a secondary concern.
- Year 2 the practice was used as PDP development – however the students were rarely proactive tending to wait to be told what to do. They didn't consider how their behaviour impacted on others involved or look into what could be improved. The students were familiar with a number of frameworks but not necessarily using them in a productive way.

Sue and Mary came to the conclusion that too much was expected of the first year students given their lack of experience of reflective practice. They felt that within the first year they needed to help their students to build confidence in dealing with issues faced in the second year. They have stopped teaching the theory on reflection in terms of models etc and instead try to encourage their students to consider and be aware of their own best practice and how to learn from this. They encourage their students to keep a detailed account of what they are doing and revisit around three weeks later.

Sue Folley invited Sue Taylor and Mary Dyer to share the paper they had delivered at the University's 2010 Teaching & Learning Conference with the group and make it available as a resource on the ipark site.

Pat Hill, Music, Humanities and Media

Pat has been working along with colleagues on the 'Embedding Skills' project for the last few months. Pat's experience is that their students often have no real idea about how to reflect on their learning. To improve this situation the following structured approach has been implemented:

A module entitled “Introduction to critical and cultural theory” includes an element about the students’ learning and the applying of theory to them and their lives. They have to keep a learning journal and a reflective blog and then build these into an assessed critical essay.

All lectures are put on screen castes so there is the opportunity for students to revisit alongside time built within a module to reflect.

A practical workshop is held at which the students work on a reflective exercise, taken from Jennifer Moon’s book “Learning Journals, A handbook for academics, students and professional development”.

This involves reading accounts of a critical incident – the students then discuss in groups the differences between the accounts, specifically trying to identify the elements that are reflective, descriptive etc from the following criteria.

- descriptive writing
- descriptive reflection
- dialogic reflection
- critical reflection.

Has it improved the students’ ability to reflect effectively on their learning? Students tend to find it easier if they can relate to the content of the exercise. Currently the accredited module is separate from any PDP undertaken but it is proposed that it should be incorporated.

Rowan Bailey

Rowan has ‘inherited’ the Integrated-learning Portfolio, a system used by design students – that was set up by her predecessor. The portfolio is based in Blackboard and is predominantly student-led in terms of how they choose to organise the content. It was felt it was important for the students to have their own ‘course’ space. Students collect evidence of the use of their academic skills throughout the year and then reflect on their progress via a written report that is cross-referenced to the evidence. They keep their own learning journal in which they can input entries, upload images etc. As an incentive to do this they have to select four blog entries from across the year to include in their portfolio.

A number of support elements are in place:

- Rowan briefs the students and provides workshops
- In addition a learning journal / reflective blog is provided which includes tips and signposts for the students on how to reflect on their practice, analyse the experience and identify evidence to write up in their report
- For the initial blog/journal entries students are given feedback
- Information, ideas, exercises and templates are provided.

Some students have indicated that they found it difficult to work electronically as they are used to working in notebooks. They were advised to scan in notebook entries where appropriate.

Joanne Blake:

Joanne is based in the Department of Leadership and Management within the Business School but worked on a HEIF funded project from 2006 to 2008; a reflective practice guide was developed as part of the project work. The self-paced guide included skills evaluation exercises and focussed students on demonstrating their skills via the provision of examples. In addition students who had part-time jobs were able to write about the learning and skills they developed in the workplace as part of their module coursework. More recently Joanne has been working on an interactive guide via Blackboard, accessed via the Expo LX tab in the VLE. She is currently in the process of developing audio files and interactive diagrams etc. This is not assessed coursework but is there to support student reflective practice across their course and can be saved as part of a portfolio. The guide is soon to be used with post-graduate research students via collaboration with Jean York in Research and Enterprise.

Julie Wilkinson

Julie works in the School of Computing and Engineering and has found that getting their students to reflect has its challenges and Julie says she tends to avoid using the term 'reflection' with the students as they don't identify with it. In particular a lot of reflective work has been undertaken with the postgraduate students and built into their assessed course work in the last few years.

Julie recommends starting 'small' and building up to larger pieces of work. From experience, no 'one size fits all', so she provides as much variety as possible in terms of templates/processes etc. For example they use a structured reflective template – whereby the students pick a critical event/activity on which to reflect. Julie puts up her own examples. The process is managed as students' develop this work – this entails ensuring students' attend sessions and tutors looking at what they are inputting into the templates etc.

Other approaches include:

- A Reflective diary/journal process and notes ([business balls. com](http://businessballs.com))
- Having champions to encourage students to reflect on key things that have happened in a module/placement year etc.
- Encouraging students to analyse the types of behaviour that they exhibit particularly in terms of team/group work.
- The use of metaphor analysis –use metaphors to describe their organisation and then their own behaviour. Using metaphorical descriptions to describe what they are doing and then move onto characterisation.

Students tend to be more receptive to these approaches once they have undertaken the more structured processes at the start. They are taught to think about reflection as things that have happened and are reminded to 'look forward' for example "how will I measure and know that I've succeeded in this?"

Placement reflection: The students' complete a personality questionnaire contained in a handbook they receive from the placement unit. This effectively gets them to make a judgement at the start of the placement on where they are at the moment and where they would like to be on completion. This is then used in a final assignment – critical and reflective evaluation of the placement experience.

Additional discussion

The use of blogs and wikis as vehicles for reflective practice were discussed. Key points raised were that reflective blogs were often kept private, though some colleagues are using managed public blogs. Audio blogs can be easier for students who are dyslexic or struggle with typing.

- Group reflective practice was also touched upon; approaches included: peer-to-peer support via students interviewing each other.
- Team performance reflection – individuals comment on each of their team member with three positive comments and suggesting three areas for improvement.
- In some areas group wikis were used for teams to write and work together.