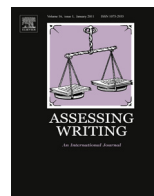




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Assessing Writing



The three-fold benefit of reflective writing: Improving program assessment, student learning, and faculty professional development



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ABSTRACT

This article presents a model of reflective writing used to assess a U.S. general education first-year writing course. We argue that integrating reflection into existing assignments has three potential benefits: enhancing assessment of learning outcomes, fostering student learning, and engaging faculty in professional development. We describe how our research-based assessment process and findings yielded insights into students' writing processes, promoted metacognition and transfer of learning, and revealed a variety of professional development needs. We conclude with a description of our three-fold model of reflection and suggest how others can adapt our approach.

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1. Introduction

When students reflect upon their learning, they engage in a potentially transformative act of responding to, connecting with, and analyzing an experience, event, process, or product. Reflection is one way to bridge the divide between thought and action—an opportunity for students to describe their internal processes, evaluate their challenges, and recognize their triumphs in ways that would otherwise remain unarticulated. Dewey (1910) argued that reflective thinking can lead to powerful educational transformations. Building on Dewey's work, Schön (1987, 1995) demonstrated the

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importance of reflective practices for engaged learning in a variety of contexts. Schön (1987) identified “reflection-in-action” as a form of critical thinking: “rethinking” past knowledge or actions and “further thinking that affects what we do” in the immediate task and in similar situations (p. 29). A primary purpose of education is for students to adapt knowledge from their immediate learning context to personal, professional, educational and civic contexts (Perkins, Tishman, Ritchart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000; Russell & Yañez, 2003). We see reflection as a key component in that process. Because the first-year writing (FYW) and general education (GE) curricula in U.S. higher education emphasize building bridges,¹ reflection has tremendous potential for courses throughout the university.

At Oakland University, what started with using reflection as a tool for mandated GE assessment of our required FYW course has led us to develop a model of reflection as a unified approach for improving student learning across the curriculum. Analyzing our experiences spanning three academic years, we argue that reflection yields a three-fold benefit relevant to assessing writing across curricula: (1) to enhance assessment, (2) to promote student learning, and (3) to improve teaching.

In the sections that follow, we first explain how our model of reflection is situated in the scholarship of teaching and learning in writing studies and higher education. After describing our research context and direct assessment methods, we show how reflection became a key part of our research-based writing assessment process and explain our method of triangulating assessment findings for students’ research papers, students’ reflective essays, and instructors’ course materials. Drawing on our assessment results, we present the case for using reflection to facilitate student learning. Issues raised by our assessment results led us to conduct a more refined analysis of a subset of our reflective writing data to address specific questions about our students’ perceptions of learning. Our findings demonstrate how reflective writing can encourage students to view learning as a process, develop students’ metacognitive awareness, and promote transfer of learning beyond FYW courses. We then discuss how integrating reflection into our assessment process revealed the need for more faculty professional development to address faculty resistance and to develop effective strategies for teaching reflection.

Synthesizing suggestions from previous literature with our own experiences, we conclude by articulating a model of reflection in higher education where reflection sits in the center of a variety of productive activities. We see these activities surrounding reflection as a way to “close the loop” (Condon, 2009, p. 149) and bring assessment findings back into the classroom. While our research-based assessment project is situated in the context of a writing course in U.S. higher education, it has broader implications for teaching and learning scholarship across national, institutional, and disciplinary contexts because it offers both a specific pedagogical tool and a model for research-based assessment of student learning through reflective writing.

2. Reflection in the scholarship of teaching and learning

2.1. Definitions and features of reflection

Denton (2011) demonstrated that while there is no single definition for “reflection” across higher education, characteristic factors repeat throughout the literature: evaluation over time, thorough exploration of ideas, depth of analysis, metacognitive awareness, and connection of reflection to specific practices (pp. 841–842). In this section, we summarize the disparate literature on reflection and define the features of reflection that most influenced our construct of reflection for this project: understanding writing and learning processes, fostering metacognition, and encouraging transfer of learning.

Schön (1995) defined “reflective transfer” as situated inquiry that generates working models, which require “modification and testing in ‘the next situation’” (p. 97). Drawing on Schön’s work, Yancey

¹ Russell and Yañez (2003) described U.S. GE courses as “similar to the ‘modular courses’” used in the U.K. (p. 362, note 1). Readers of this journal may also be familiar with the goals of U.S. GE curricula through Morozov’s (2011) study of writing-intensive courses.

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