

Toward Objectivity: The History, Value and Usage of Reflective Writing

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内省的作文：その歴史・価値・そして活用方法

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Abstract

The author first takes the reader through a short history of reflective writing and its connections with John Dewey, then talks about its value for students and teachers and finally offers suggestions for its usage in the classroom.

Key words: reflective, autonomy, objectivity, development, analyze, change, initiate, scientific, in-class, 15-minute, template

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抄 録

著者はまず読者に内省的作文（リフレクティブライティング）の簡略な歴史およびジョン・デュウィとのつながりを紹介し、その後に内省的作文が生徒と教師双方にとってどのような価値があるのかを、そして最後に実際の授業の場での活用方法を提案する。

キーワード：内省的作文、リフレクティブライティング、自主性、客観性、成、分析、変化、科学的、開始、授業で、15分、テンプレート

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Introduction

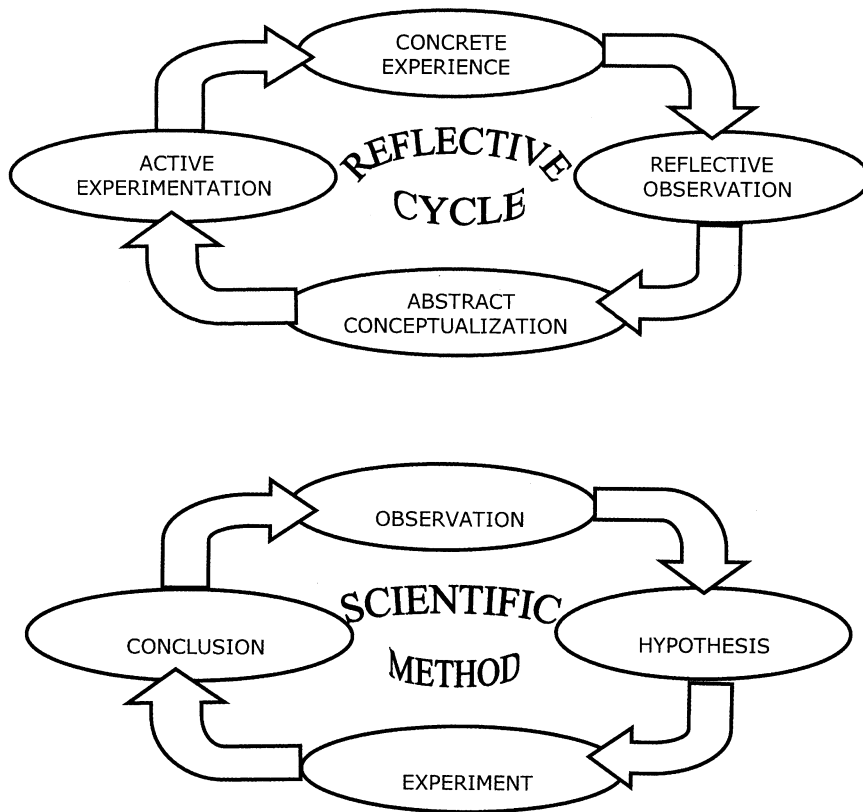
*'It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn.
Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten,
Alternatively, its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts
emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated.
And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively.'*
(Gibbs 2001)

Change is constant on our planet. From chemicals to compounds, from the inanimate to the animate, from plants to animals and most definitely, to the human species. Change cannot be stopped, but it can be directed. This paper addresses change, its relationship to development, and how we, as teachers, can author and architect change in ourselves and in our students. To initiate this change, both personally and professionally, it is essential that we step back regularly and reflect on what we have done, so that we may objectively analyze it and make positive changes for the future. This paper looks into the process of change through reflective writing by first looking into its history, then its educational value, and finally, how the discipline of reflective writing can be used in the classroom by the teacher and by the student in a quest toward objectivity.

Recent history of reflective writing

Most modern day reflective writing practitioners draw either directly or indirectly from the reflective cycle developed by John Dewey (1859–1952).

In 1932, John Dewey took development from an innate sense to a scientific process with the inauguration of the reflective cycle. Dewey's reflective cycle provided a blueprint for modern day reflective writing. To better comprehend the roots of reflective writing, we should first understand what influenced John Dewey in his formulation of the reflective cycle. Dewey had many renowned influences, and among these was G. Stanley Hall, one of Dewey's teachers and a well-known experimental psychologist in the first quarter of the 20th century. Hall provided Dewey with an appreciation of the power of scientific methodology and this may have provided Dewey with the framework for his reflective cycle. (Dewey J. (n.d) para. 3) In turn, Dewey seems to have fused the general elements of the scientific method with his reflective cycle. The following graphics attempt to note the similarities.



As noted in the graphics, the reflective cycle first critically observes and documents a situation, then analyzes it and implements changes. The scientific method critically observes a phenomenon, hypothesizes as to why that phenomenon occurs, experiments with the phenomenon and finally finds a conclusion according to its findings (Wolf F. (n.d)). Both the scientific method and the reflective cycle strive toward objectivity through in-depth observation and critical analysis. By utilizing some basic elements of learning found within the scientific method, Dewey gave us a developmental tool we can use to bring about change within our lives and our students' lives. Over the 70 years since the reflective cycle was introduced, educators have sung its praises and many of us have practiced it in our teacher training courses. At present, there are varying steps to reflective writing, which are specific to the goal and level of practitioners, but all retain the fabric of what Dewey offered the teaching world and all support the value of looking back to go forward (Dewey, J. (2004)).

Value

Tell me, and I will forget.

Show me, and I may remember.

Involve me, and I will understand.

-Confucius, 450 B.C.

The value of being able to architect and implement our own personal and professional development cannot be understated. Reflective writing holds benefits for both teachers and students alike. Since April 1999, I have received over 3000 reflective writing journals from college students and reflective drawing papers from 8-year old students

Value for Teachers:

As educators, teaching is the tool we use to cultivate professional and personal development in our students. Reflective writing can assist us in our task.

Imagine if over the course of one semester you took the time to write a weekly reflective journal on what you did in the classroom that week, what worked for you and your students, what was difficult in the classroom and what you wanted to change for the next week. By writing down what you did that week, then objectively analyzing it, and, drawing from your analysis, planning for the next week, you would be continuously searching for and gaining a new perspective on your work, systematically performing ongoing research on your teaching and creating a weekly blueprint for your personal and professional development. Through weekly reflective writing, our ongoing reflection allows us to take an active part in our own development that touches on our lives, and the people we work with and teach. Teachers are the initiators of change so if we can utilize a tool for our own personal and professional development then that development will be passed on to our students and ultimately to their families and communities. As instructors intent on serving student development, we need to address our own. It is a simple fact, that for teaching to change, the instructor must change also, for as Parker Palmer so aptly phrased it, "We teach who we are" (Palmer, P. 1998). This is the challenge of teaching, to develop personally so that we may develop professionally and serve our students better. The process of serving our students touches first on personal development by allowing teachers to not only go deeper in their analysis but to see things differently, to break from the emotions and biases that we all carry and view our work in a more objective manner. Viewing our work as an interested bystander brings more rational, more mature decision-making, and thus, development. But, it is hoped that this does not remain specific only to one academic discipline, but takes hold and becomes an intuitive life skill, ingrained in

the reflective practitioner's writing, thinking and action.

Value for Students:

If reflective writing offers teachers a tool for development, then would not this same tool work for students as well? If there were a gift we would like to give our students and have them be able to use for the rest of their lives, would it not be the gift of taking an active part in their own development? If taught and utilized from an early age, would reflective writing become partially or wholly ingrained in students and become the framework of their analytical thinking and a part of their daily lives? This begs the question whether reflective writing should, in fact, be part of the fabric of education.

Through research performed from September 1999 to July 2006, this author has found that reflective writing using the reflective cycle supports understanding of lessons and the processing and retention of information by utilizing the disciplines of thoroughness and analysis, which lead toward objectivity. In order for there to be learning, students need to be actively manipulating material so as to personalize it. This personalization allows them to put the material into their own personal language so that the information can then be better processed and retained. Reflective writing addresses this. The sequence resulting in learning allows students to make changes in their academic lives and therefore, allows them to architect, then implement their own development.

This Development, rooted in the reflective cycle, can also be taught to children. While younger students unable to write cannot utilize reflective writing, they can utilize reflective drawing. Following the same format as reflective writing, young students draw pictures of what happened, what was good, what was difficult and what they want to do next.

Usage of Reflective Writing

...there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education.

Dewey, J. (2004)

While educators have sung the praises of reflective writing for the last 70 years, few educators actually use it due to time constraints. Indeed, in 1999, while writing an interim report for a master's degree course, this author spent 23 hours one weekend writing about a 40-minute Berlitz lesson. I can still picture the room, see the student's face, hear his voice and even remember some of his words, but 23 hours of writing on a weekly basis is just not realistic for most of us. So, to bring the benefits of reflection to the reality of working life, I devised a simple reflective writing exercise called Uncle Tom's Quick Bread or U.T. Q.B, which has all the ingredients of Dewey's reflective cycle but takes only 15 minutes to complete and is student friendly.

Here is the five-step process:

1. Brainstorm words related to lesson/s- 2 minutes
2. What happened in the lesson -7 minutes?
3. What worked -2 minutes
4. What didn't work 2minutes
5. What's next - 2minutes

While definitely not producing the rewards of lengthy reflection, this exercise provides teachers and students alike a tool to reflect on weekly activities, evaluate what they did and plan changes for the following week. In essence, students learn to see what went on in the classroom, learn to describe what happened in some depth, learn to critically analyze what they learned and finally learn to take intelligent action on their reflection (Rogers, C. 2002). With time, students and teachers go deeper with their reflections, noticing the relationship between their inner and outer environments. There is also collaboration between teacher and student, as students have input into what they learn next by commenting on what they want to do in the following class. After receiving over 3000 reflective journals since 1999, I find that although the mindset of reflection can take time for both student and teacher, there are short term and long-term benefits. Short-term academic benefits come in the form of critical thinking, objectivity, empowerment and engagement. I would hope that long term benefits would see reflection evolve from a structured exercise to an innate sense, enhancing all aspects of the practitioner's life.

The sequence:

The sequence of the five-step process guides students from words toward more complex writing structures and deeper analytical thinking. Students can take their nouns, adjectives and verbs from brainstorming and use them to help structure sentences for *What happened* in the lesson. Their sentences in *What happened* provide material for becoming more analytical and objective in *What worked* and *What didn't work*, and this, in turn, supports students in deciding *What's next*, which helps them to take an active part in their own development. In addition, the timing of the exercise puts it in a free writing mode, which places more emphasis on message and less on the constraints of grammar. Therefore, the sequence and timing of the exercise guide and support students through the process, allowing them to look deeper into their learning, gain new perspectives, and from this, make changes. In addition, since the procedure is based on Dewey's reflective cycle, it seems to accommodate different learner styles, whether practitioners are cognitive, kinesthetic, holistic or detailed (Kolb, D. (n.d)).

In-class writing

I use the exercise in the last 15 minutes of the last class of the week and I write my

journal as students write theirs. After class, I write or adapt the next week's lesson plan according to what I wrote and what students wrote. My students appreciate when I include what they want to do next in my lesson plan and this provides me with ongoing feedback into what our class needs to focus on. Additionally, I found that drawing from my own reflection and my students' reflections actually saved time in writing my lesson plans and produced richer lessons.

Appropriate language

The language of the sequence should be appropriate to student level and experience with reflective writing. It can be very simple for younger students,

What I did

What I liked

What I didn't like

What I want to do.

Or more complex,

What happened

What helped my learning and why

What didn't help my learning and why

Changes I need to make to help my learning

There are numerous ways to phrase the sequence and it is suggested that teachers experiment and see what works for their students. (Dewey, J. (2004))

I usually start with simple phrasing at the beginning of the semester and make it more complex as students progress linguistically and are comfortable going deeper with their reflections.

Expansion

Reflective writing can be made into a four skills exercise by forming pairs or groups after students write their journals and having one student read their journal while others shadow, practice active listening or ask questions to the student. While this can be rewarding, I would suggest that this be done with higher level or more experienced practitioners.

Teacher feedback

Teacher comments on students' reflective writing help students stay within the bounds of reflective writing, encourage them to go deeper in their analysis and inspire them to follow a thread in their reflections. The following is an example of a reflective journal with teacher comments posted under each section of the journal:

Student Comment 1

Subject: Oral English

Date: December 10th, 1999

Teacher comment: You have all the important information here.

Brainstorm words:

wheater report, partly, sunny, cloudy, stormy, rainy, Yoga, Relax, show n'tell, souvenir, Paris, postcards, collection,

90210, blond, sweater, picture, shirt, pony tale, sleep, time management, manners, train, super market

Teacher: Try to write as many words as you can in Brainstorm. This helps you to remember what happened and it also helps with writing your sentences in What happened.

What happened:

(on Monday) We did Weather report. At first, everybody were partly cloudy or worse except me, but when we finished class

everybody felt sunny. And we did Yoga to relax. Next we listened to Yuka's show n' tell about souvenir form Paris, And then we watched 90210: Wrote down everything that I notice in the picture, Who & What & Where & Why about their telephone conversation, acted like Kelly & Blend. It was really fun!!!

(on Thursday) Project check; Write sentences, direct & produce it, and we will succeed. We also checked how many people in our class get enough sleep, and we found that Time management & Relaxing is important to get enough sleep. Yuki's show n' tell about her hobby that is collecting postcards.

We talked about manners in the train, on the street, in the theater, and in super market. I can't believe that high school student sit on the floor in the train!!

When I first saw the sight, I was really surprised at that with my mouth open. *Teacher: You remember a lot from this week. What did Yuka say about her souvenir? How much do you remember from 90210? Can you say more about Yuki's postcards? The more you write, the more you learn.*

What helped me:

Free conversation gave me some new vocabulary; “cut in a line.”

To think about manners is really important for us.

And from Yuki’s show n’tell, I got the vocabulary: “same age as....”

I’m really happy to get a new saying “World peace begins in your heart”

Teacher: Yes Hiromi, manners are important. Sounds like vocabulary is quite important to you. Your new words and expressions can go into your vocabulary list and be sure to try to use them in class. What does, “World peace begins in our hearts” mean to you?

Student Comment 2

What didn’t help me:

When we talked about Journal with group somebody talked about other things in Japanese. I thought that we shouldn’t waste our time.

Teacher: Yes, what should you do if others are speaking Japanese? Any ideas?

What I want to change to help my learning:

Time management!!!!

I can’t concentrate my attention on one thing.

I didn’t reach my last goal that is time management.

Time management is going to be my lifetime goal!

Teacher: And mine too.. We can always be better with time management. Let me know how you are doing. Your journal looks like you’re going in the right direction. You are writing what happened, what helped you, what didn’t help you and what you want to do next. You are on the road to becoming an independent learner.

More on teacher comments

Teacher comments on students’ reflective writing help students in their reflective journey. I believe and have found through experience that it serves students better not to grade their reflective journals, but to support and guide them toward going deeper with their reflections and helping them to make reflective writing a part of their lives.

Here are two more examples with teacher comments:

Student Comment 3

What didn’t help me

Student: The inside of the class room was a little hot. I thought well of Gaby’s and MADAS’ project, but it was difficult for me. I couldn’t catch the movie words but I understood sometimes the person can’t catch it even who speaks English. I don’t have the vocabulary much, so it makes me confused when I learn.

Teacher: Everyone needs more vocabulary. Hmm, this could be a good idea for your next project. Doing a project on vocabulary can help with your vocabulary.

What I'd like to change:

Student: I want to change myself. I want to study hard myself.

Teacher: This is powerful. Changing yourself is the first step toward becoming better. I like how you put the responsibility on yourself. What is one way that you can change yourself? I'd like to hear more about this. Please let me know and let's keep this a topic in your future journals

Great journal!

Reflective drawing

Three years ago my daughter came home from her 2nd grade class and I asked her what parents have always asked their child, "How was school"? and she said what children always have said and that is "Fine". Of course, as a parent, I'd like an answer in a little more depth but children do not seem to produce it.

Anyway, one day I asked my daughter to draw a picture of something that happened at school that day. She drew a picture of her teacher at the blackboard and I asked her to tell me about the picture. She began with a description of what her teacher was wearing, the fact that her teacher was strict that day, then she went into the lesson about math and how two boys were talking during the lesson and a girl asked the teacher a question.

Perhaps a picture IS worth 1000 words or at least can provide students with 1000 words. Relevant to this paper, the point is that even if students cannot write English properly, they can draw a picture which may unleash a wealth of verbal information or support their written language. I have used reflective drawing with eight year olds and to one degree or another students could coherently talk about their six-hour day at school and used their drawings to tell their parents about their school day when they got home. From this, I started to suggest to university students that they could draw a picture in their reflective journal if they wished.

One student drew a picture of himself walking up a mountain and wrote underneath, "One step at a time" to shed light on his English learning. Another student drew a perfect picture of a young girl from a story I had read the class and went on to describe in detail the story and how it affected her. There is a certain magic with pictures that seems to engage and bring out the writer in a student.

Other student work

The reflective sequence can also be used for written or verbal feedback on other student work. By first addressing what the student did, then what was good and not so good, and finally suggesting or working with the student to find what they need to do to improve, the reflective cycle offers a thorough, objective analysis of any and all student work.

Some other ways to use reflective writing in school programs:

1. Student end of semester feedback.
2. Student project or paper feedback
3. Teacher course feedback
4. Student report card feedback
5. Problem/solution writing papers
6. Journals

In summary, reflective writing as taken from John Dewey's reflective cycle, provides a template for development for teachers and students alike. While being quite valuable, we rarely use it due to the time it takes to write a reflective journal. The author finds that a 15-minute exercise in the discipline, while not providing all the benefits of extensive writing can still have value and could ultimately become a part of students' lives, leading them toward objectivity in analyzing what they do and ultimately, toward self-improvement. This offers students and teachers a way they can take this reflective tool off the shelf and utilize the process so as to provide them with a means in which they can take an active part in their own personal and professional success.

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