Looking Backward, Living Forward: Reflection At BYU-Idaho

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In his diary, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1960) wrote, “Life must be understood backwards. But ...it must be lived—fowards” (p. 111). During the Winter and Spring Semesters 2012, I conducted a qualitative study to describe reflection—or looking backward—as perceived by students in five disciplines: Horticulture, Education, Business Management, English, and Religion. Objectives of the study included helping teachers understand the Ponder/Prove process, identifying strategies for teaching reflection, and providing teachers with ideas for assignments and activities that help students reach the level of reflection that encourages them to act for themselves and accept responsibility for their learning. My research assistant, Andrew Kemp, and I observed classes, interviewed professors, and coded artifacts. One result of our collaboration was Andrew's oral presentation at the Fall 2012 Research and Creative Works Conference.

UNDERSTANDING PONDER/PROVE


> after students have encountered new information and ideas and have new ‘doing’ or ‘observing’ experiences, they need time to reflect in order to decide what meaning to give to these other learning activities. Without this reflection, they have learned something but they have not made that learning fully meaningful to themselves. (p. 110)

The Ponder/Prove step of the Learning Model directs students to make “learning fully meaningful to themselves.” One reason to study reflection at BYU-I is that the scriptural terms of ponder and prove correspond to the teaching terms reflection and critical reflection. The scriptures repeatedly invite us to ponder:

- “Inquire for yourself at my hand, and ponder upon the things which you have received” (D&C 30:3).
- “I leave these sayings with you to ponder in your hearts...” (D&C 88:62).
• “When ye shall read these things...remember...and ponder it in your hearts” (Moroni 10:3).

The scriptures also direct us to prove:
• “Examine me, O Lord, and prove me” (Psalms 26:2).
• “Let every man prove his own work” (Galatians 6:4).
• “Prove all things” (I Thessalonians 5:21).
• “I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant” (D&C 98:14).

To reflect means to look back at an experience, ponder it thoughtfully, weigh it carefully, and make a personal connection to create meaning. But to critically reflect—or to prove—is to take action, because “Reflection without action is not true reflection” (Woodward, 1998, p. 417). Action “includes making a decision, making an association, revising a point of view, reframing or solving a problem, modifying an attitude, or producing a change in behavior” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 12). For a student to take full responsibility for learning, they need to reach the level of critical reflection, which prompts them to take action to apply what they have learned. In “Eight Ways God Can Speak To You,” Elder Dallin H. Oaks addresses the importance of taking action:

The eighth purpose or type of revelation consists of those instances where the Spirit impels a person to action...not a case where a person proposes to take a particular action and the Spirit either confirms or restrains. This is a case where revelation comes...and impels some action. (Oaks, 2004)

It is the application—or proving—that creates significant learning and change or ‘living forward.’

Many students need mentoring and practice to connect course material to learning and life experiences.

TEACHING REFLECTION

To understand how the Learning Model promotes reflection in the five disciplines, through Ponder/Prove, we collected course assignments that require reflection: horticulture students write a reflective journal after a class visit from a professional; education students reflect on readings and then create a parable that captures their teaching philosophy; religion and literature students compose journal entries; business majors write 5-10 page reflective summation papers. Interviews with students identified that “Problems [include a] lack of student’s understanding of ‘reflection’” (Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 2002, p. 40). We learned that while students may be assigned reflective writing as part of their learning experience, not all students develop reflective skills, and many students need mentoring and practice to connect course material to learning and life experiences.

In David Magleby’s education class students encounter readings from Debois, Hull, and Plato and then write a Capture Assignment. For the Capture Assignment students identify the principles and application taught in each reading and its affect on their philosophy of teaching. The Capture Assignments culminate in a personal parable that narrates how each future teacher plans to teach in his or her own classroom. During Andrew’s conversation with Brother Magleby they decide that about a quarter of the students don’t try and thus don’t reap any educational benefit. “Why does this happen? Brother Magleby and I come to the conclusion that reflection is hard, and that even those who do it, don’t want to. We don’t want to change.”

The journal Mark Orchard assigns in his Book of Mormon class provides a structured format to direct students to reflect and a vehicle to recognize the changes they have experienced. One of his students recounted: “Brother Orchard has us write in a journal everyday, and when we write in that journal every day it gets us to think. And when I write in that journal I’m able to remember more of what I learned about, and that way, I’m able to reflect on it.” The student also said, “Brother Orchard is mainly there to promote the discussion. He’ll ask a question, and then everyone else builds off it. Actually he doesn’t do much talking, it’s us, so that’s cool.” The
Journal assignment, combined with the class discussion, helped the student reach the level of critical reflection: “When I reflect on those things, I start to implement those things in my life more than if I wouldn’t reflect on them . . . compared to my other religion classes, I’ve learned more in this one. . .and reflection is a big part of that. You can read all you want, but if you don’t think about it, you won’t learn anything.”

At BYU-Idaho students need help understanding how reflection contributes to their ability to question, investigate, and understand their own learning (Brookfield, 1995) because, too often, teachers assume that reflection is automatic (Woodward, 1998). From interviewing students, observing classrooms, and analyzing papers, we learned that students need more instruction on how to reflect so they learn to recognize the changes they have made—reflection is a skill that needs a coach/mentor and repeated practice. Classroom observations suggested three teaching strategies that facilitate reflection on the BYU-I campus: (1) foster safety, (2) ask questions, and (3) make assignments.

1. **Foster Safety**

The first teaching strategy that promotes reflection is to foster a healing learning environment. “Students must feel safe, valued, and loved for learning to occur” (Orchard, 2012, pp. 24-25). Brookfield (1995) suggests one way to promote safety. In his class the first 10 percent of each week’s class time is devoted to an open-ended, open-agenda ‘troubleshooting’ period. “Students know that this is the time when they can publicly raise any concerns they have about the course and expect a response from me” (p. 101). This open, safe format fosters an environment where students feel safe to reflect. Brooks does this by first inviting questions and if they are reluctant to be forthcoming, he tells them the challenges the class has had in previous semesters to make it safe for them to talk.
about the challenges they face; he takes the first risk by admitting previous classes have had questions and so they probably do, too. Orchard (2012) believes that

Being aware of safety violations...is key to establishing student participation and therefore higher student engagement. I try never to ignore a prompting that something is amiss with a student and that their feeling of emotional safety is threatened...First, I assure students that the classroom is literally a safe environment and that everyone is a valuable contributor...I try to be sensitive and respond with deep interest to student questions or comments...
Safety is the foundation and cornerstone of the learning environment and must be protected fervently against anything that would threaten otherwise.

( pp. 24-25)

The need for safety is illustrated by a student’s reflection following the Experience Europe travel study: “Reflecting on my answers was kind of strange. I was much more honest than I expected myself to be...I have changed how I think about certain things...you have many of my secrets now...take them to the grave.”

Fink (2003) recommends reflecting alone and with others: “When people collaboratively search for the meaning of experiences, information, and ideas, they also create the foundation for community. Creating a sense of community is a concept that can greatly enhance the quality of a learning experience” (p. 106) and a community can enhance the safety of the learning environment.

2. ASK QUESTIONS

The second teaching strategy suggested by the study is that teachers must ask probing questions to direct students to reflect. “Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions....To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate our thought” (Paul & Elder, 2000). Fink (2003) suggests using questions for one-minute essays and asking questions like: “What was the muddiest point today? What was the most important idea you encountered? In your own words describe the relationship of X to Y. What important questions remain unanswered for you?” (p. 117). Other reflective prompts for class discussions might include: Tell me about a time....? Which part of today’s lesson did you find the most engaging? What was the most significant idea you encountered?

A simple assessment tool is to ask students at the end of a semester to reflect on the course and ask them if the course has met its objectives. A teacher might ask: What is the most important thing you have learned this semester about business (or horticulture or education)? Teachers could also list the course objectives and then prompt students to self-report, “Consider the course objectives and assess how well you feel the course has achieved its objectives.”

Traci Gardner (2009) asks five questions about reading literature that could be adapted to most disciplines. Substitute a field of study for the word literature:

1. What piece of literature has stayed with you, even though you haven’t read it recently? 2. What character or story has influenced something you’ve done? 3. What character or piece of literature seemed to relate to a recent news story or personal experience? 4. What character has made you wonder why he or she did/said something? 5. Name something from a work of literature (such as a character, setting, or quotation) that you find beautiful or vivid.

In English classes students answer four questions the first day: (1) Who am I? (2) Why am I here? (3) What do I want for my career? (4) What do I want to learn as a college graduate? Or what do I want to know and do?
The questions originated with Carroll and Pappas (2012) as a first-day introductory activity:

At the end of the semester, students review their original responses and answer the questions again. (Answers might be handwritten inside the student’s name tent. They can also be recorded on I-Learn with the personal journal tool.) During the research study 77 pre/post responses were analyzed. Replies to each question ranged from major changes and life perspective, to general satisfaction with their current endeavors. Using the questions as a pre/post tool directed and focused the students’ reflections.

The same questions were adapted for Experience Europe 2012. Just prior to departure, 34 students were asked to briefly answer a variation on Fink’s four questions:

1 Who are you? As you respond consider your roles in your family and apartment (son/daughter, sister/brother, uncle/aunt, etc.) and your roles at work, church, and school. Describe your personality.

2 Why are you at BYU-I and specifically why are you going on Experience Europe?

3 Where are you going? This question relates to your career and life goals AFTER you leave BYU-I.

4 What do you want from your education at BYU-I? What is it you want to know (content) and what is it you want to be able to do (skills)?

Students were also told, “When you return from the travel study you will answer the four questions again and compare your answers. This will help you reflect on the meaning of the travel experience and the new ideas you have acquired.” This thought was included in the instructions.

As humans, we have the capacity to change the meaning of our ideas and experiences—but only when we pull our original meanings up to the conscious level and reflect on what new meaning we want those ideas or experiences to have. Only then do we become meaning-making beings, rather than simply meaning-receiving beings. (Fink, 2003, p. 106)

Upon their return, the students’ reflections included comments like: “Reflecting on my experience has helped me to really pinpoint exactly how beneficial the trip was for me and even how I can use the experience to benefit me in the future.” “After Europe, I feel like I am headed in a different direction.” “After looking at my new answers I know I have learned so much from this trip. I have been up against my worst fears. I did not conquer them, but I am more aware of my own capabilities when I am terrified.” “I’ve learned from my reflections more about what type of person I want to be.”

During the research study we learned the difference asking questions can make in the level of reflection. In B322 students were asked to write a 5-10 page reflection paper describing “all you have learned about organizational behavior and how you have applied it.” The instructions directed students to “cite specific examples where you were able to draw lessons and self-application principles from your interactions with the company and team.” Out of 95 students, 25 gave permission for their papers to be read and analyzed. After coding 13 papers Andrew reported saturation: “I know it is called a Summation Paper but the instructions tell them to reflect and tell how they have applied what they learned and they aren’t reflecting.” The papers from Winter 2012 mostly summarized course content with little reflection. In Spring 2012 a description of reflection was added to the instructions: “Reflection is an activity in which you..."
recapture your experience, think about it, mull it over, and then evaluate it. . . . Your Summation Paper will reflect on all the activities, lessons, and assignments for the course. Your Conclusion is where you evaluate your success in applying course content to practice.” Also added to the assignment instructions were reflective questions: “As you craft your Conclusion consider these questions: (1) Have I experienced personal changes as a result of applying the course to my life? (2) What are the lessons I have learned? (3) What perceptions have changed? (4) What commitments have I made? (5) What behaviors have I modified? (6) With which ideas have I wrestled?” The business instructor and the researchers concluded that adding questions to the instructions made a significant difference in the quality of the papers in Spring 2012 and the level of reflection achieved.

Another strategy for using questions in the classroom is to ask students to write their answers to potential job interview questions. On About.com, Alison Doyle asks the “Top 10 Interview Questions.” Her questions prompt students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, or how they handle stress. English students choose three of Doyle’s questions then craft a thoughtful response that demonstrates their strongest writing skills. Answering the interview questions encourages students to reflect on strengths and skills and helps prepare them for job interviews. The answers to the job interview questions are included on their e-portfolio with their résumé and cover letter.

3. **MAKE ASSIGNMENTS**

Dee Fink (2003) encourages teachers to “promote in-depth reflective writing on the learning process” (p. 116). Substantive writing includes term papers and essays. “Reflective writing, on the other hand, focuses on the writer’s learning experience itself and attempts to identify the significance and meaning of a given learning experience, primarily for the writer” (p. 117). Substantive writing helps a writer think through their thoughts and ideas on a topic. “Reflective writing has a different value, that of helping the writer become more self-conscious about learning” (117). Fink encourages reflective writing such as journals, diaries, or learning logs. At BYU-I horticulture students write a reflective journal entry after a professional from the field visits class. Students are instructed to apply what they hear from a working professional to their future career plans.

Fink’s highest level of reflective writing is a Learning Portfolio created for a course, all the courses in a student’s major, or their whole college experience (p. 118). During the study we observed two disciplines where majors create an e-portfolio that includes reflective writing: business and English. Students reflect on each document or artifact they upload and then provide an explication. They may also include a reading list and describe how each work connects to their personal philosophy and future practice.

In the five disciplines in the research study the most frequently assigned reflective writing is a formal reflective paper. In English, students are directed to “Recapture your experience with literature this semester by responding to three prompts” which include reflecting on what they have learned about reflection, describing personal changes from keeping a reflective journal, and considering how their testimony might have been strengthened. Other formal assignments also encourage reflection. Education students write a parable that describes their educational philosophy. Religion students report a scriptural event and place themselves in the story. English students
are given three minutes the last day of class to share a personal metaphor that describes their learning experience in the course AND share their favorite passage from one of the works read during the semester. Objects brought to one class included an ocarina flute, fresh rose, sliced bread, Kokopelli figurine, Snoopy keychain, and broken alarm clock. In another English class students design a Creative Response. They spend 2-4 hours responding creatively to a work (including its culture or the historical setting) or the author. When they share their Creative Response with the class they explain how their project connects to their own life and the personal experiences that prompted the project. A dance major choreographed and filmed a dance inspired by a work of poetry that provided comfort after the death of her friend. An art major invited classmates to model and organized a fashion shoot with Victorian costumes. Another student stitched a line of poetry into a pillow as a gift for her sister. Other reflective writing assignments encountered during the study included reflective journals, multi-genre essays, class journals, senior thesis, and first-person narratives for an event in the discipline.

**REFLECTING ON THE IMPLICATIONS**

At BYU-Idaho not all students and teachers understand how reflection contributes to students’ ability to question, investigate, and understand their own learning (Brookfield, 1995). When asked to reflect students often complete a reflective writing assignment by describing an event or activity but many fail to reflect. If the objective of a writing assignment is to promote reflection then instructions must clearly articulate the difference between reviewing or summarizing and reflection. In addition, students need feedback on their writing and encouragement to reflect, otherwise they mostly summarize a class or a reading assignment rather than reflect. However, when given sufficient instruction and opportunities to develop reflective skills students do reflect on significant changes in their personal life, academic understanding, and career goals.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

“To help students become more adept at meaning making, . . . means they need to spend more time reflecting on the meaning of the experiences and new ideas they acquire” (Fink, 2003, p. 106). This can be accomplished by adding reflective questions to instructions, asking reflective questions during class discussions, encouraging students to reflect on the course objectives, and assigning reflective writing. Kierkegaard said “life must be understood backwards” and the scriptures affirm that reflection, or looking backward, increases our understanding: “As I pondered over these things...the eyes of my understanding were opened” (D&C 138:11). Reflection encourages students to look backwards so they might live forwards.

**References**


