HELPING STUDENTS PONDER AND REFLECT

PURPOSE
It is in reflection that students turn ideas they’ve been exposed to into integrated understanding. The emphasis that the Learning Model places on prepared students becoming engaged in their learning should not overshadow the importance of reflection in the learning process. This tool addresses ways to initiate and support student reflection.

DESCRIPTION
Preparation exposes students to material, readying them to reflect more deeply upon it. Teaching one another is powerful, in part, because it forces students to thoughtfully organize and structure their understanding—a form of reflection.

Preparation and active learning connect the student to the learning experience, whereas reflection connects the learning experience to the student.

There are several ways you can think about reflection as part of the learning process.

1. One way is to see reflection as a process that turns an experience into a learning experience. It is that moment of stepping back—pausing—and contemplating an experience in order to derive deeper meaning. This form of reflection is the kind referred to by philosopher John Dewey who said, “Experience plus Reflection equals Learning.”

2. It’s also possible to conceive of reflection as paying attention to the emotional or affective elements of the learning process. This type of reflection aids in the integration of new learning with the learner’s existing cognitive world.

3. A third way to think of reflection is allowing one’s self to experience the surprise, confusion or uncertainty that occurs when presented with something that doesn’t seem to fit our previous understanding. In this situation, a learner ponders on the new situation as well as on the prior understanding to bridge the gap.

4. Yet a fourth way to think of reflection is as process awareness. This type of reflective learner is critically aware of the processes which contribute to learning, and evaluates the quality of learning against the reliability of the process.

5. The fifth kind of reflective learning is akin to planning. The learner consciously draws upon prior skills and knowledge to thoughtfully plan the means of engaging a new learning situation.

These 5 types of reflection offer ways to structure activities to deepen reflective learning.

1. Reviewing experience to derive meaning.
   - Assign students to pause and to think of questions after completing their preparation work.
   - Have students keep a learning journal with explicit instructions on the kinds of things they are to write.
   - Teach students to observe in detail before reacting to or interpreting the observations.
   - Help students map theoretical concepts onto aspects of their detailed observations.

2. Accounting for the affective (Emotional).
   - Draw parallels to the gospel: Students are already practiced at pondering in a gospel context, so gospel connections should tie secular learning into those reflective processes.
   - Offer in-class opportunities for silence: Teach students the value of quiet meditation, pondering, and prayer in their learning. If silence makes students uncomfortable, try using background music.
   - Call on students to share thoughts about their learning, not just to summarize it.
   - Implement structured blogging.
   - Personalize: Help the students see the relevance to their lives and experiences.

3. Living in the uncertainty.
   - Where appropriate, build your syllabus or instructional plans around problems, cases, paradoxes, etc. Problem solving by its very nature is a reflective process.
   - Help students understand that learning is as much about understanding the right questions as it is about finding the right answers.

4. Critical awareness of the process.
   - Articulate study questions for each text, or offer students a study guide of some kind to help during the Prepare activities.
Teach students to **jot down questions** or thoughts in their notes.

Include **reflective work in the grade**. Model **reflective learning** for them; students need to see their instructors ponder, pause while instructing, and adjust accordingly.

Ask **explicit questions about the thought process**. For example:

- How do you know when you’re thinking?
- What form do your thoughts take?
- Are there other forms besides “self-talk”?
- Distinguish thoughts from feelings.
- Can you describe your thought process for reaching that conclusion?

### 5. Thoughtful engagement with new material.

- **Make time in class** for students to reflect alone or in small groups. Planning structured reflective exercises is as important as involving and engaging students in learning experiences.
- Encourage or require students to use **study groups, mutual peer tutoring, other tools of reflective learning**.
- Leave them at the end of each class with one or several **provocative questions** about what they’ve just discussed or what they will encounter in their homework.

Once students have reflected on their learning, it is appropriate to follow up with activities that force them to articulate, share, or write the results of their ruminations.

### Example

A review of his **syllabus** showed an instructor that he had very little in-class time scheduled for reflection activities. Usually he called after the students as they filed out of class to “think about” something in preparation for next class.

Determined to do better, the instructor made room at the end of every Thursday or Friday class for a reflection activity. Since he was new to this, he chose an activity that looked fairly simple to implement—mutual peer tutoring. Each week, he would carefully prepare an initial question about the week’s material. After being trained the first time on the process, students would follow the structured process of questions and answers to explore their understanding. The activity took about 20 minutes, but the instructor saw a marked increase in understanding and retention for the time invested.

### Tips

- **Identify reflective activities.** Inform students which assignments or activities are specifically reflective activities, or better yet, indicate in your syllabus.
- **Articulate the activity’s purpose.** Each reflection activity needs to fulfill a part of your intended outcomes. Students want to know the benefits of any activity before they commit their time to it.
- **Help structure the process.** Use graphic organizers, special note taking paper, worksheets, basically anything to help structure the reflective process of the students.
- **Focus on several topics.** Try for deep learning on a few topics. It encourages reflection more than “survey” learning.

### Pitfalls

- **Overestimation:** It is easy to assume that students know how to be reflective learners. They need explicit and supportive guidance in developing these skills.

### Key Articles

