Reflective Writing: an Approach to Developing Critical Thinking & Proficient Writing

Nadine Ross

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Abstract: This literature review endeavors to show how instructors can use reflective writing as a tool to help students improve their critical thinking skills and become more proficient writers. Reflective writing is a term that includes a variety of classroom writing activities ranging from semester-long journaling projects to short in-class writing exercises that ask students to summarize a lecture or discussion. Despite the variety of activities included under this umbrella, reflective writing activities have the potential to improve the quality of student writing by increasing the quality and quantity of student writing practice.

"Writing—the art of communicating thoughts of the mind—is the great invention of the world…. Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions."¹

—Abraham Lincoln

The written word is a powerful tool, but few college students share Lincoln’s appreciation for formal writing and its potential to have a profound effect on the world. In a time when social networking sites and instant messaging have changed the manner in which people communicate in their public and private lives, many college students have limited opportunities to practice the critical thinking skills that are essential to effective, formal writing. This review endeavors to show how instructors can use reflective writing as a tool to help students improve their critical thinking skills and become more proficient writers.

Recent studies indicate that the decline in writing skills is a widespread problem in the American education system. In fact, the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges published a 2003 report that highlighted this crisis. Despite years of formal education, many graduates of secondary schools lacked the ability to communicate effectively in writing.² According to the U.S.

² Ibid., 16.
Department of Education’s 1998 National Assessment of Education Progress as few as 22% of high school seniors met the standards for “proficient” writing in that year’s assessment.³ The most recent writing assessment conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2007 found that only 33% of high school seniors achieved the Department’s standards for “proficient” writing.⁴ While the 11% improvement in writing proficiency among high school seniors is noteworthy, this progress should not overshadow the fact that there is still a great deal of work to be done to improve student writing in the college classroom.

In their 2011 study, Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses, Professors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa tracked over 2,300 students from a variety of colleges and universities in the United States between fall 2005 and spring 2009. The results of this study indicated that 45% of students participating in the study showed no significant improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning and communication skills after two years of undergraduate education and 36% of students did not show any significant improvement after four years of college.⁵ If this research is correct, then it is time for instructors to consider new approaches to teaching writing skills in their courses.

If 67% of college freshmen begin their undergraduate studies without the analytical skills necessary to communicate effectively, instructors at those institutions must create opportunities in the classroom for students to learn and practice the skills that they are sorely missing. While there are numerous approaches that instructors have used to address these deficiencies, some of those methods do not appear to help students achieve writing proficiency. Reflective writing could assist faculty members in addressing these challenges.

Defining “Reflective Writing”

Reflective writing is a term that includes a variety of classroom writing activities ranging from semester-long journaling projects to short in-class writing exercises that ask students to summarize a lecture or discussion. Despite the variety of activities included under this umbrella, reflective writing activities have the potential to improve the quality of student writing by increasing the quality and quantity of student writing practice. Reflective writing can improve the quality of student writing by encouraging students to move beyond describing events and listing facts. Instead, students analyze and interpret facts in order to make sense of the information they have learned in class. It is through this process of critical analysis that students are able to connect discrete pieces of information into meaningful ideas that will be more easily recalled at a later date. According to John Dewey, the reflective thinking process removes the burden of undigested information from students and allows students to work towards a more meaningful understanding and comprehension of any given subject. By engaging with information in a more critical manner, students must take ownership of the information and give it a meaning for their lives as learners and future professionals. Additionally, instructors can use reflective writing to address the issue of infrequent student writing by providing students with more opportunities to practice explaining complex ideas using clear and concise language. Whether writing a daily journal entry or short lecture summaries during each class session or once a week, students will have more quality writing practice and teachers will have more opportunities to provide formal or informal feedback to students regarding their comprehension of the material and ability to clearly communicate their ideas.

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7 Reginald D. Archambault, ed., John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings, (New York: Random House, 1964), 249. John Dewey was an educational philosopher who is often cited as one of the seminal theorists of reflective practice.
Recent Studies on the Value of Reflection in the Classroom

In the last two decades, educators have expressed a growing interest in the usefulness of reflective writing as a tool in the classroom. Many of those instructors used their curiosity about reflective writing to develop research projects about its effects on learning, retention, and comprehension in a variety of disciplines. In 1997, Martha Davis and Richard Hull conducted a study that investigated the effects of requiring a group of students to write short summaries during brief pauses in a psychology lecture. Although immediate post-lecture testing showed no significant difference in student performance, students who wrote summaries during the four-minute lecture breaks performed better on the lecture post-tests that occurred 12 days later. Davis and Hull attribute the summary writers’ improved retention to the process of review, reorganization and synthesis that these students had to complete in order to write their summaries.9 Three years later, a similar study conducted by Karen Hartlep and G. Alfred Forsyth confirmed the valuable contribution that reflection made to learning and retention. Their examination of study techniques found that reflection aided student retention of material.10 In studies, such as the Ash, Clayton and Atkinson study of reflection in service-learning courses, students who participated in courses requiring reflective writing showed a 48% increase in their ability to demonstrate analysis and evaluation in their writing at the end of the course.11

Tips for Implementing Reflective Writing in your Classroom

Due to the growing interest in reflective writing, an increasing percentage of the literature on this topic incorporates a variety of suggestions for implementing reflective writing in the classroom. Additionally, several sources address faculty and student concerns about reflective writing as a classroom activity. The suggestions that follow summarize the most frequently reflective writing tips based on research and classroom experiences of college professors.

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Give it purpose: Students may be skeptical of the value of this activity, but it is important that the instructor help students understand the purpose of this activity in this course. If students understand how these activities relate to the course, students will be more likely to approach reflection with an open mind. Often this is as simple as explaining how the reflective activity connects to the goals and objectives of the course. This connection should be explained prior to the first introduction of reflective activities in the classroom and periodically reemphasized throughout the semester.¹²

Provide a starting point: Instructors can help students focus their thoughts during reflective writing by providing students with a prompt based on the course material. A few example prompts are listed below:

- Do you think the Spanish American Wars of Independence were inevitable?
- Is the United States’ relationship with Cuba similar or different from the United States’ relationship with other countries in Central America and the Caribbean?

Prompts, such as these, are designed to encourage students focus on key lesson concepts and require students to do more than simply list facts from the reading.¹³ Instead, they must analyze that information and determine what they believe to be the best answer. In writing their answer, these students must consider the best way to explain their argument and determine which facts best support their claim.

Set clear expectations: Education scholars and practitioners of reflective writing have a variety of views on how to assess reflective writing, if at all. After determining what is best for you, your students, and the course, it is essential that you communicate your expectations and grading standards to the students. Regardless of your decision, your students should understand that these exercises require critical analysis

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¹³ Ibid., 103.
not simply listing facts. As a result, instructor feedback should reflect the emphasis on analysis and synthesis by focusing primarily on these areas in student reflections.  

Find efficiencies that save time: Some instructors argue that reflective writing is a valuable, but time consuming task. This does not have to be the case. First, students can conduct reflective writing activities in a five to fifteen minute time frame during class meetings. This ensures that students complete reflective activities regardless of their busy schedules. Second, faculty can use a variety of techniques to make the process of providing feedback more efficient. Instructors can choose to alter the frequency of reflective writing activities (i.e. during each class or once a week) or alter the frequency of grading student reflections (i.e. once a week). Additionally, grading reflections on a pass/fail basis or using a rubric can make assessment more efficient and less stressful for the instructor. In either case, it is important that students receive instructor feedback on their progress and how they can improve their analytical skills.

The written word is powerful. It is powerful because it has the ability to influence people, but it also has the power to help writers think about information and ideas in new ways. By teaching students to harness the power of the written word in professional and academic settings, instructors are helping student become effective communicators and equipping them to think critically about the ideas they encounter. If “the reward of disciplined writing is…a mind equipped to think,” then reflective writing is

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One professor noted that pass-fail grading was “incredibly freeing.”
WORKS CITED


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Engaging Ideas is a great starting point for faculty members who want to learn more about reflective writing and its integration into the classroom. This book includes a variety of suggestions for coaching students to become better writers and thinkers. More importantly, the first chapter provides an overview of the book to assist busy professors in finding the sections that deal directly with their area of interest of concern.


The authors examined 215 journal entries from educators and administrators in an elective course to study how students enrolled in their elective internalized the information they learned in a course about at-risk populations in schools. Their study found that the journal were an effective way to help students engage in critical thinking about complex issues, work towards finding solutions, and articulate them to others.


In this article, Creme explores the issue of assessing reflective writing, particularly when dealing with student learning journals. Creme suggests that faculty incorporate peer reviews as a way to provide feedback to students without students feeling as though their thoughts are being “judged.” This is an interesting alternative or complement to instructor feedback and may be a worthwhile approach to consider.


Hubbs and Brand view reflective writing as an effective way for educators to “see” their students’ “internal ‘making of meaning’” in writing. This article briefly explores the educational philosophies that contribute to the birth of reflective writing and provides brief ethical guidelines for instructional use of reflective journals. Additionally, the authors provide a content-process continuum, which is a useful way to visualize the critical thinking that reflective writing strives to help students achieve.


Based on a discussion between the authors and eight university faculty members, this article provides great insights into faculty experiences with using reflective journals in the classroom. One of the most intriguing parts of this article is the section in which the survey participants provide suggestions based on their experiences.

This book provides a detailed explanation of the value of journal writing and how it can be used in the classroom and professional settings. The authors describe a variety of formats and include images from student and their personal journals to illustrate the variety of applications of journal writing. The book also includes 19 case studies (ten case studies deal directly with using journals in the classroom) that offer suggestions and lessons learned about this form of reflective writing.


Although this book is focused on preparing teachers to be critical thinkers, it includes a number of activities and grading rubrics that can be adapted for any course or topic.