The Toolbox

A TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Volume 15
Issue 5
May 2017

The Power of Critical Reflection

Imagine the last day of class in a senior seminar course. While packing to leave, a student observes, "I really enjoyed all of the reflection activities in this class. I haven't had a chance to reflect like that before." This positive comment is troubling if, like many others, the student has taken advantage of meaningful undergraduate learning experiences within and beyond the classroom but not reflected critically on their importance and application.

Many students address real-world problems and grow in their intellectual capacity but miss reflection, a key ingredient of learning. Reflection indicates "the consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose" through continuous and careful thought (www.merriam-webster.com). With this in mind, reflection is not simply describing, reacting to, or evaluating something (Clarke & Van Scoy, 2012). Rather, it is "the process of analyzing, reconsidering and questioning one's experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge" (Jacoby, 2014, p. 26).

For educators, getting students to reflect is an important yet daunting task. Several theoretical models provide context and can serve as guides for promoting learning and reflection.

The Experiential Learning Model

David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model demonstrates how to weave reflection into the learning experience to help students deduce meaning:

- The first stage involves a *concrete experience*, an event students can examine through the senses (e.g., observations, demonstrations, role-play, field experience/interviews).
- The second stage is *reflective observation*, in which students review and begin to make meaning of the experience through means such as journal prompts, one-on-one discussions, or small-group reflection.
- In the third stage, *abstract conceptualization*, students work with generalizations, theoretical concepts, and ideas (e.g., from readings and lectures). Abstraction demands a concrete foundation, as Heath and Heath (2007) put it aptly: "Trying to teach an abstract principle without concrete foundations is like trying to start a house by building a roof in the air" (p. 106).
- In the model's final stage, *active experimentation*, students apply information they have learned by writing papers, exploring "what if" scenarios, creating action plans, and solving problems.

> "Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful."
>
> — Margaret J. Wheatley, American writer

A practical use of Kolb's experiential learning model as a framework to promote reflection and learning is the Oxfam Hunger Banquet, designed to raise awareness of poverty and hunger. Participants draw a random ticket and are assigned to a high-, middle-, or low-income tier according to current statistics on world poverty. Experiences at the banquet differ greatly, depending on participants' assigned tiers. The 20% assigned to the high-income tier enjoy a sumptuous, four-course meal; the 30% in the middle-income group eat a simple meal such as rice and beans; and the 50% in the low-income tier receive small portions of rice and water. A master of ceremonies guides the groups through the experience and facilitates a reflection time at the end.

In applying Kolb's model, students first would attend the banquet (concrete experience). They then would describe, in journal form, how the experience made them feel, why they reacted the way they did, and the overall purpose of the activity (reflective observation). An assigned reading and lecture on global income inequality (abstract conceptualization) could follow. Students could apply and integrate concepts learned by writing an op-ed article for a local newspaper with recommendations to address issues such as feeding the local homeless population (active experimentation).

The Four C's

Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996), writing about service-learning, suggest using Four C's when planning and facilitating reflection:

- ***Continuous***—Incorporate reflection throughout the learning experience—before, during, and afterward.
- ***Connected***—When reflection is connected, students can integrate their beyond-the-classroom learning with theories and concepts from class. Reflection activities aim to help students connect the abstract to the concrete. In some cases, students can connect their learning to other life experiences.
- ***Challenging***—Ask students to think critically. Reflection questions go beyond the surface and stretch students' thinking. Students may be asked to develop alternative explanations for what they thought and observed initially.
- ***Contextualized***—Connect reflection activities to overall goals of the learning experiences. Further, make those experiences appropriate and meaningful and ask students to reflect beyond the current moment or activity.

Putting It into Practice

The following four prompts and activities are practical ways to promote reflection:

- ***Letter to myself***—Students write a letter to themselves, describing their hopes and fears before engaging in the learning experience. Having a record of what they thought as they approached a task can show how far they have come and be a powerful learning tool at the end of the semester or after the learning experience.
- ***Three-part journal***—A journal entry is divided into thirds (i.e., description, analysis, application). In the first section, students describe a beyond-the-classroom learning experience. In the second section, they analyze how course content relates to the experience. In the application section, students write about how they can apply the experience and course content to their personal or professional life (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999).

ONLINE COURSES

ON THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

JUNE 12 - JULY 14, 2017

MADE TO MEASURE: INTERMEDIATE PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

Instructor: Dallin George Young

JULY 31 - AUGUST 25, 2017

THE BRIDGE TO ANYWHERE: ENHANCING STUDENT SUCCESS AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT THROUGH BRIDGE PROGRAMS

Instructor: Drew Newton

WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/OC

- ***Exit cards***—Students turn in a note card at the end of the class period. On the front, they reflect on disciplinary content and class discussion and write one thing they learned during the period. On the back, they write a question that still lingers about the topic.
- ***Case studies***—Given a scenario that addresses content from class and a real-world context, students gather in small groups and discuss ways to address the issue presented. See the sidebar at right for an example.

Barbara Jacoby reminds us that reflection does not close "an experience with a nice, tidy, little bow. Rather, reflection is ongoing, it's often messy, and it provides more openings than closings" (Jacoby, 2011, para 1). As educators, our responsibility is to help students become more comfortable with ambiguity. Our ability to create an atmosphere of trust, both within and beyond the classroom, is critical to each student's ability to reflect well. They need to know that some questions may go unanswered, but that is part of the process.

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European **First-Year Experience** Conference

Join us in

Birmingham, **England**

June 28 - 30, 2017

EFYE is a group of academics and support staff from across Europe interested in improving the experience of students as they enter higher education. This young and exciting conference partners with the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience hosted each February by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. With this supportive environment, you can expect to hear of innovation and excellent projects that put students at the center of the first-year learning experience.

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Critical Reflection: A Case Study Example for Students

Paul is an undeclared student in his first year of college. While taking general education courses, he finds that he really enjoys writing, literature, and history. He begins exploring a humanities major and meets with his advisor to discuss possibilities. Paul is excited to learn that a humanities major will mean an opportunity to study abroad and minor in French. When he tells his family about his plans to declare a humanities major, his parents get upset and say he should pursue business or a professional degree instead. They even threaten to withhold financial support if he does not. Paul feels discouraged, confused, and unable to move forward. If you were Paul, how might you respond in this situation and why? Discuss his possible alternatives. What are the benefits and liabilities of these? In what ways could the decision Paul makes affect his overall college experience?

What's Happening at The National Resource Center

Conferences and Continuing Education

Conferences and Institutes

Save the Date

Institute on Developing and Sustaining First-Year Seminars
July 28-30, 2017
Hyatt Regency Savannah
Savannah, Georgia
www.sc.edu/fye/IDSFYS/

24th National Conference on Students in Transition
October 21-23, 2017
The Westin South Coast Plaza
Costa Mesa, California
www.sc.edu/fye/SIT/

Online Courses

The National Resource Center offers online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses provide participants the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions or forums, listservs, and blogs. Enrollment is limited to 40 participants. Participants will earn 1.5 continuing education units for each course. Visit http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc for more information.

Online Course Offerings

Made to Measure: Intermediate Principles of Assessment
June 12 – July 14, 2017
Instructor: Dallin George Young

The Bridge to Anywhere: Enhancing Student Success and Institutional Impact Through Bridge Programs
July 31 – August 25, 2017
Instructor: Andrew (Drew) Newton

E-Source Submission Guidelines

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see www.sc.edu/fye/esource/guidelines.html

Audience: *E-Source* readers include academic and student affairs administrators and faculty from a variety of fields interested in student transitions. All types of institutions are represented in the readership.

Style: Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) style.
E-Source does not publish endorsements of products for sale.

Length: Original feature-length articles should be 750-1,200 words. Annotations of new resources should be no more than 500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length. Photographs are welcome.

Please address all questions and submissions to:
E-Source Editor
National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition
University of South Carolina
1728 College Street
Columbia, SC 29208
E-mail: esource@mailbox.sc.edu

Sign up for

Looking for new teaching strategies or fresh ideas for first-year seminars? *E-Source*, the National Resource Center's online newsletter for college transitions, offers a wealth of information. *E-Source* also is accepting submissions for the December 2017 issue. To view the archives, review submission guidelines, and receive content alerts for new issues, please go to www.sc.edu/fye/esource.

Publications

Share Your Strategies on Student Transitions

Consider submitting a manuscript for *The Toolbox*. Published six times a year, *The Toolbox* is an electronic newsletter providing practical strategies for student learning and success. Articles on a variety of topics related to teaching and learning are welcome, especially those focusing on:

- faculty–student relationships;
- principles and practices of effective course design;
- active-learning strategies for face-to-face venues;
- applications of digital technology to face-to-face and online venues;
- alternative strategies to assess student learning;
- strategies and techniques for meeting the learning needs of diverse student populations.

Find complete submission guidelines and more information online at www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox. You can also contact the *Toolbox* editor, Brad Garner, via e-mail at brad.garner@indwes.edu if you have questions about the guidelines or the review process. Submissions are accepted anytime; however, they must be received by **Monday, July 24** to be considered for the September 2017 issue.

Awards and Recognition

Institutional Excellence for Students in Transition

The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is committed to setting the standard for excellence in supporting students at critical junctures in the educational pipeline. We also seek to promote intentional and integrative connections within and across institutions and educational sectors to enhance the student transition experience. In light of these core commitments, the National Resource Center has launched a new award recognizing institutional excellence for students in transition. The award is presented annually to institutions that have designed and implemented outstanding collaborative initiatives enhancing significant transitions during the undergraduate experience. Award recipients will have demonstrated the effectiveness of the initiative in supporting student success, learning, and development at a variety of transition points beyond the first college year and in responding to unique institutional needs.

Nominations are accepted at http://sc.edu/fye/awards/IE_Award.html
Deadline for nominations: July 11, 2017

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The Toolbox

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The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox.

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