

Integrating Reflection in Writing

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Reflection is frequently mentioned in the literature as a learning activity, primarily as a means to engage the mind and to promote learning from previous experiences. Reflection is used in education in a variety of ways, from reflecting on an experience to thinking about how past experiences can influence future decision making. In its common use, reflection involves a degree of thinking beyond a superficial glance at a previous experience, pushing it to critical analysis. Although used and described as a means of learning, reflection, in its typical sense, is not readily considered as a method that can be applied to writing. However, reflection principles are strikingly applicable to the writing process and outcomes.

SELF-REVIEW AND PEER CONVERSATIONS

Two reflective concepts that can be used to improve the writing process are *self-review* and *peer conversations* (Brookfield, 1998). Self-review incorporates an introspective review of a particular work or process, focusing on the writer's personal experiences. Peer conversations involve dialogue with colleagues. This dialogue allows peers to offer input and insight into writing, thus giving the writer a diverse view of a topic. These peer conversations about writing can help to garner ideas that may not have become apparent without the influence of other viewpoints.

Reflection involves a review of personal experiences, and self-review is one method to utilize when reviewing writing experiences. Self-review can be incorporated into the writing process before starting a new work. For instance, before starting a manuscript, dedicate time to think about what writing approaches have worked in the past. Use that information to make writing adjustments. Consider your last writing activity, and ask yourself the following questions:

- What helped me be successful?
- What went wrong?
- Where were my struggles?
- Where was I the last time my writing was prolific?
- What have I done in the past that has helped me get into a writing state-of-mind?

Through self-review, you may learn that certain thoughts or preparatory actions may be integral to bountiful writing, making it an important part of the writing process. This reflection may also provide insight into problematic areas that could be changed.

Although an internal review through self-reflection offers numerous benefits, Brookfield (1998) also discussed the value of peer conversations. Consider the last time you met with a peer to discuss some project you were working on. This interaction may have occurred in a happenstance fashion without much calculated effort. Passing conversations about writing projects can offer some input and at times may work to improve writing. However, having structured and purposeful conversations with colleagues may provide the focus necessary to fully devote attention to the work and aid in manuscript planning; it may be helpful to schedule these conversations. You might consider preparing a short elevator speech about your writing ideas in advance of the conversation. This synopsis can help you to express major objectives and the direction of the writing to your peer and can also help to succinctly convey ideas. Reflecting on the work and then sharing it with others allows for a peer to offer more concise input.

When using peer conversations to improve writing, it is helpful to articulate your writing concerns upfront. These peer conversations can help to illuminate writing problems, highlight areas of concern, and offer insight for areas needing improvement. Additionally, these meetings may stimulate ideas that you had not considered before a draft of a work is completed. From this peer input, you can reflect on the possibility of utilizing the newly gained insight or perspectives while also attempting to connect to the self-review. Additionally, these peer conversations can also help establish new techniques for writing that may not have come about with only introspection.

REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AND REFLECTION-ON-ACTION

Other reflection experts also offer strategies that can help writers. Schön (1984) introduced the concepts of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action encompasses reflection during an action (Schön, 1984). In other words, a writer reflects on what is happening, connects it to a prior experience, and

generates a new understanding on how to move forward in a beneficial manner while an experience is occurring. Reflection-on-action occurs after an experience, allowing for experiential learning and knowledge growth (Donaghy & Morss, 2000).

Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action can be exceptionally helpful when writing becomes difficult. Taking a purposeful step back and reflecting can help move beyond this troublesome period. It may be beneficial to think back on what has worked in the past to overcome similar circumstances. Revisiting an outline to re-establish direction or re-reading what has already been written can help move writing forward. This approach can also be useful to sustain and improve writing quality. Reflecting while writing can highlight commonplace phrases, words, or sentence structures used on a regular basis. In this way, it is easier to see how these items can be changed to improve writing dynamics. While implementing reflection-in-action, ask yourself the following questions:

- How have I made this piece of work stand out from my other works?
- How can I make this work better than what I have done before?
- What can I focus on to continue to develop my work?
- Is this work going the direction I want it to?
- How can I make my voice clearer?
- Am I conveying my ideas succinctly?
- Are there gaps or missing items in my writing?
- Have I provided clear transitions between ideas?

Implementing reflective strategies while writing may prove easier to complete during the writing process versus taking a more traditional approach and trying to revise a work once it is fully constructed. At first, reflection-in-action may seem

time-consuming and odd, but it certainly offers a unique approach to evaluating and improving writing throughout the writing process. Reflection-on-action should feel much more familiar, as reflecting after an experience is a more typical use of reflection. Critiquing your work after completing writing gives a more comprehensive picture, providing different insights that may not have been evident with reflection-in-action.

CRITICAL EXAMINATION

Mezirow (1997) suggests challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning and experiences and focusing on moving beyond a surface-level critique. This approach can be used to critically examine writing after completing a draft, allowing for corrections to occur early in the writing process. Upon draft completion, you can step away from the work and move on to other activities such as working on other writing or academic projects, non-academic activities, or recreational activities. This break time allows for some mental distance and offers you the time to think back on what you wrote. Depending upon personal preferences, the caliber of the writing, deadlines, and other restrictions, the amount of time away from writing can vary greatly. It can be simply walking away for a few moments or can extend over multiple days. Before returning to write, carefully re-read prior work and critically examine the message communicated. As the writer, you could reflect on the following:

- Consider what worked well. What changes can I make?
- What needs further explanation?
- What is not clear?
- Are my ideas connecting and flowing well?
- Is my message being conveyed appropriately?
- Does my writing sequence make sense?

- Did I accurately answer the prompt/question?
- Does the writing align with the purpose or topic statement?

Not only can you reflect on the content of the draft, but it may be helpful to also examine the writing process. Specifically, examine these ideas:

- How did I create this work?
- What was crucial to me being able to pull all of this information together?
- In what ways can I improve?
- Is there something I could have done to make this easier?
- What was my most productive time? Most productive setting?
- What could I have done differently?

In this way, you can reflect upon and evaluate the writing process in a purposeful fashion and distinguish areas of improvement. It may be helpful to record notes and ideas for future writing. This may also help identify frequent writing traps and encourage progressive writing development. After this reflection, you can then go back to the particular piece of work and revise as necessary. This process can be iterative, allowing for significant intervention in both content and the writing process.

CONCLUSION

Although most of these reflective interventions sound relatively simple and straightforward, using them as writing techniques to improve quality and proficiency can be challenging. Two of the most difficult aspects surrounding reflective practices in writing are the time and effort needed. It is important to stay consistent and emphasize reflection throughout all stages of writing, streaming from development of preliminary ideas, to composing, to the

conclusion of a work. It is also relevant to use reflection in a more distant sense after work completion, such as when an article has been reviewed by a journal or when revisions are requested by an editor. Sustaining the critical nature of reflection can also prove difficult as it can be much quicker to only reflect at a superficial level.

The suggested techniques offer viable options to aid writers to continually improve and develop. Dedicating the time to use reflection as part of the writing process and sustaining this effort appears to be the most challenging component of this venture. However, adoption of these reflective principles in writing can certainly provide some additional value to your writing process.

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