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Reflective Writing

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Introduction

During your time at University, it is likely that you will be asked to write at least one reflective essay. Many students find this difficult, because reflective writing is quite different from other assignments and discussing your own feelings and performance in academic work can be tricky at first. By reflecting, you will be looking back at something which has happened in order to show what you have learned from it. You'll need to explain what happened, how you felt about it, what you learned, whether you could have handled things differently and what you need to learn or do differently in the future. This help guide will take you through the process of producing a reflective essay.

What sort of reflective essay might I have to do?

You're most likely to be asked to write reflectively about an incident which has happened on your placement. You might also have to write reflectively about the process you went through in order to carry out a project or to produce another assignment. This kind of assignment feels strange at first to many students, and you might be wondering where to start with your essay. Before you start, check the following:

1. What have you been asked to write about? For example, if you have to reflect on an incident which occurred during your placement, can you think of a suitable incident? Have you been given guidelines about what kind of incident to use? It doesn't necessarily have to be something negative, and you could choose to write about something which went really well.
2. Have you been told to use a certain 'model of reflection'? There are many different models which help to guide you through the process of reflecting, and while they all help you to reach the same end result, they may have different

headings and sections. Make sure you know which model you have to use. The most commonly-used model is by Gibbs (1988), which is the model we will look at in most detail here. If you are asked to use another model such as Johns (1995) or 'What? So What? Now What?' (Borton, 1970, updated by Driscoll, 1994), you will structure the assignment slightly differently but the purpose and content will still be the same.

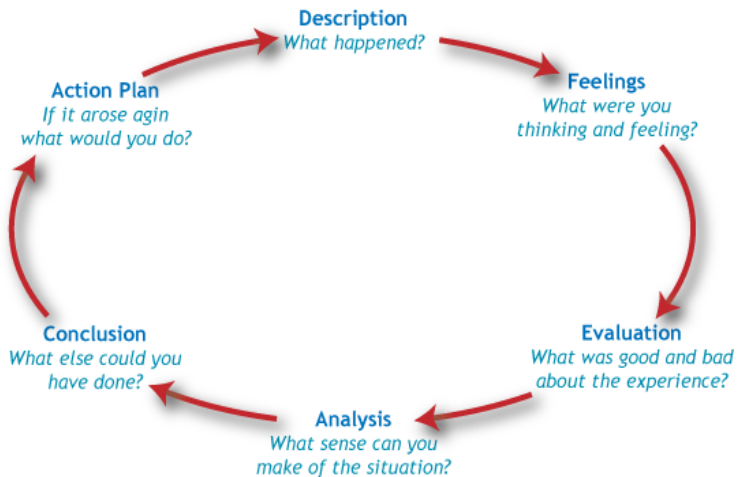
3. Have you been given any instructions about how to present your assignment? You may have been asked to use headings to separate the different sections of your assignment, so make sure that you check the requirements so that you set out your assignment correctly.

Writing style

Reflective writing is different from most other assignments because it is probably the only time you will be required to use "I" and "me" in an essay. You will be writing about your own personal experience and feelings, and in reflective writing it is important to tell the reader what you think and feel about things. Many students find this difficult to get used to, as they have always been told to avoid the use of "I" in assignments, and to avoid giving their own opinion.

Gibbs' model of reflection

There are six stages in Gibbs' model, and each will be discussed in turn here. There is also a sample assignment at the end of this guide, which is written using Gibbs' model and is structured using headings for clarity.



Gibbs' model of reflection, from Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Further Education Unit.

Description

In this section, you'll need to explain what happened. There might be some background information, such as where you were working at the time (being careful not to identify individual people or places). Tell the reader who was involved and describe the incident itself without discussing your feelings yet – just the facts are required at this stage.

Feelings

Discuss your feelings and thoughts about the incident in this section. How did you feel at the time? What about afterwards? What did you think at the time? What did you think about the incident afterwards? You can discuss your emotions honestly in this section, but make sure to remember at all times that this is an academic piece of writing. Be careful not to be offensive, make sure not to identify any of the people involved, and remember that it might not only be your tutor who reads the assignment.

Evaluation

In evaluating the incident, you'll be looking at how well things went. How did you react to the situation, and how did other people react? What was good and what was bad about the experience? If you are writing about a difficult incident, did you feel that the situation was resolved afterwards? Why/why not? You will probably need some theory and the work of other authors (references) in this section.

Analysis

Leading on from your evaluation, your analysis will look in greater depth at what might have helped or hindered the situation and how or why the incident came about in the first place. Importantly, you will need to bring theory and other authors' work in here. The most common reason why students get poor marks for reflective assignments is that they don't bring the theory and experience together in this section.

Conclusion

In this section, think about whether you could have done anything else during the incident, and what you have learned from it. Could you have responded in a different way? If you are talking about a positive experience will you do the same again to ensure a positive outcome, or is there anything you could change to improve things even further? If the incident was negative, how could you have avoided it happening or how can you make sure it doesn't happen again?

Action plan

Your action plan sums up anything you need to do in order to improve things for next time. Do you perhaps need to learn about something or attend some training? Could you ask your tutor or placement supervisor for some advice? What can you do which means that, if the situation arises again, you will be better equipped to cope with it?

An example of a short reflective assignment

This example uses the headings described above to demonstrate the kinds of things you might need to put in each section. The references are made up, as is the content of the assignment, it is purely to show how a reflective assignment might look.

Assignment – write a reflection of around 1,000 words about an incident which occurred during the first few weeks of your teaching placement. Use Gibbs’ model, and structure your assignment using Gibbs’ headings.

Description

I am currently on a teaching practice placement in an adult education college in the south-west of England, learning how to teach GCSE maths to various groups of adults. I have only just started the placement, so I am mainly assisting the class tutors and have just started planning and delivering a small part of each lesson.

The incident occurred in an evening class during which I was due to deliver my very first session. The class tutor had been teaching the learners about fractions, and my task was to carry on with this, looking at how to multiply two fractions. When I got to the whiteboard, I became so nervous that I could not start speaking to the group. I fumbled about with my papers and pens, and stumbled over my first sentence so that it did not make sense. The students were quite understanding, as they are all mature students who are aware that I am new to teaching and am nervous, but the class teacher snapped at me to stop being ridiculous. She came up to the front of the classroom and took the lesson over from me, and I sat at the back of the room trying not to cry. I left the session as soon as the class was over, and did not speak to anyone.

Feelings

I felt so miserable at the time that I considered leaving my teacher training course. I was embarrassed and upset by my own inability to speak in front of the group, but I was also extremely angry with the class teacher for snapping at me in front of the learners. I felt afterwards that she had not given me enough time to gather my thoughts, and that she should have left me alone to get over my nerves. I

was so mortified that I rang in sick the following week, and it was only when I had calmed down that I decided I needed to speak to the placement supervisor about this. I also realised later that it was perfectly natural to feel nervous, as I am not used to speaking in public.

Evaluation

At the time, I did not feel that the situation had been resolved at all. I very deliberately left at the end of the class without speaking to the class teacher or the learners. When I got home, I telephoned a fellow trainee and he made me feel much better. I realised that everyone feels scared at first and probably stumbles through their first few classes. This is clear in the relevant literature, as Greene (2014) explains, saying that nine out of ten new trainee teachers found their first session “incredibly daunting” (p.43). It appears that most trainee teachers have moments of being “tongue- tied” and “losing their way with the lesson” (Parbold, 2009, p.223).

Analysis

The situation was made worse by both my own actions and those of the class teacher. I feel that I

should have stood up to her, rather than letting her take control of the lesson, and that I should have spoken to her immediately after the lesson about how I was feeling. Dealing with situations like this immediately is preferable, as Cooper (2011) points out. Instead, I spoke to my placement supervisor several days later, and did not see the class teacher again until a formal meeting consisting of myself, the teacher and the supervisor. Daynes and Farris (2013) say that, by not dealing with situations immediately and personally, and instead taking it to an authority figure, the situation can be made worse. The class teacher could have felt that she was being “ganged up on” (Thomas, 2015, p.22), which could lead to future problems.

The teacher’s actions also made the situation worse, because she did not give me time to overcome my fears and she deliberately embarrassed me in front of the class. She claimed that she had thought she was helping me out, but I do not believe that to be the case. However, as we only spoke about the incident over a week later in the meeting with the supervisor, she rightly argued that I should have said something to her at the time.

Conclusion

In retrospect, I would do several things differently. I should have spoken to the class teacher immediately after the session and voiced my opinions. I should also have been braver and stood up for myself so that I retained control of the lesson. However, I think the main thing I learned from the incident is that I had built up no relationship whatsoever with the teacher in the preceding weeks, and that I should have made an effort to do so. I would then have been able to explain how nervous I was beforehand.

Action Plan

In future, I will make sure to build up more of a relationship with colleagues. I am working alongside several different teachers during my placement, and I will speak to each of them about my nerves. I have already had a good conversation with one of them, and we have worked out a way of team-teaching for the next few weeks so that I do not feel so pressurised. I need to do this with the other class teachers, as I cannot expect them to understand how I feel if I keep quiet. I also need to speak to my fellow trainees more often about how they feel, as I think I will be able to learn from them.

In terms of training, I have booked onto a presentation skills workshop at University, and intend to follow it up by attending the practice sessions afterwards. I need to gain more confidence with presenting and feel this is the best way to start.

References

(these are not real sources!)

Cooper, P.T. (2011). *Managing situations at work*. London: Rufus Publications.

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Updated July 2019