



LEARNING TO LEARN

Reflective learning: keeping a reflective learning journal

□ [DCU Student Learning Resources](#)

Office of the Vice-President for Learning Innovation and Registrar

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REFLECTIVE LEARNING: KEEPING A REFLECTIVE LEARNING JOURNAL



Introduction: understanding why reflection is important

Knowing how you learn makes you a more effective learner. Thinking about your learning and writing things down helps to clarify your thoughts and emotions in this regard. Reflection also helps you to focus and actively participate in your development as an effective independent and critical learner. Your journal will become a record of your progress throughout your study and will help you to discover the strategies and processes that work well for you. Reflection is itself a way of learning and helps you to evaluate your own performance as a learner. Remember that reflective practice is a life skill, not just a university requirement. By engaging in reflective learning you are taking an active role in learning and recognising your personal responsibility for your own lifelong learning.

Thinking and writing are closely connected processes and in order to write reflectively you need to think carefully about yourself as a learner. This process is sometimes referred to as 'metacognition', in other words, thinking about your own thought processes. This unit will suggest some strategies for writing a personal reflective journal and will demonstrate the differences between diaries, logs and reflective journals.

Learning objectives

At the end of this unit, you will:

- understand why reflective learning is important,
- know how to engage in the reflective process and write a personal reflective learning journal,

- be able to discriminate between a learning log, a diary and a reflective learning journal,
- understand that any on-line journals, diaries, etc. must comply with DCU's appropriate usage policy.

What do you think reflective learners might consider and reflect upon? Write a sentence or two before continuing.

Characteristics of reflective learning: how to engage

Reflection has been described as a:

...deliberate process during which the candidate takes time, within the course of their work, to focus on their performance and think carefully about the thinking that led to particular actions, what happened and what they are learning from the experience, in order to inform what they might do in the future. (King, 2002)

Reflective learners continually think about:

- what they are learning
- why they are learning it
- how they are learning it
- how they are using what they are learning
- what their strengths and weaknesses in learning are
- what their learning priorities are
- how they can improve and build upon their learning process
- how well they are working towards their short-, medium- and long-term goals.

Reflective learners consider:

- their motivation
- their attitudes and ideas, and changes in these
- the skills they need for different components of their study and learning
- what (if anything) is blocking their learning
- the gaps in their knowledge and skills, and how they might best work towards filling these.

Reflective learners engage with:

- the specialist discourse of their subject area
- discipline-specific conventions
- the ways in which knowledge is constructed and meaning is created in their particular subject area(s).

Reflection can be undertaken in many ways: individually or in groups, orally, through pictures or in written format. It can be descriptive and functional, critical and analytical or creative and imaginative. (See unit, **‘Creative thinking and critical thinking’**). It usually follows the approach outlined in the reflection model of ‘What? So What? Now What?’ This entails giving an objective description of what was learnt, followed by an analysis of its significance and finally its implications for future learning and behaviour.

To be an effective reflective learner, students must recognise that ‘failure’ is part of success. Learning what does not work is on the same path as learning what does work. There must be room for ‘failure’ in the reflective process. Do you agree?

How to develop as a reflective learner: writing a personal reflective learning journal



Creating a personal learning journal (or portfolio) into which you can write your reflections on your learning is an effective strategy to promote reflective thinking and learning. This should not be just a description of the topics and activities covered during a class session. It should be your thoughts and feelings about your learning, the programme and your progress. You can also make constructive use of lecturers’ and tutors’ feedback on your work.

Have a look again at the section: *Characteristics of reflective learning: how to engage, as outlined earlier*. These, together with the examples outlined below, will help you to distinguish between a learning log, a diary and a reflective learning journal.

LOG - a simple record of what happened during an event.

6/10/2007

Attended lecture, watched a video entitled "How to lie with statistics" and listened to the discussion about interrogating statistical information.

DIARY - a record of very personal thoughts not intended for others to see.

6th October 2007

Dear Diary,

I arrived at my lecture early just to see if Matt would choose to sit next to me again today. I'm not sure but I think he was flirting with me during our last lecture. When he entered the hall my heart began to race. He is so gorgeous – I have never seen such blue eyes! I just melt when he looks at me. He sat in the same seat as yesterday so at least I know he didn't choose to be further away from me. I knew we would be forming discussion groups today and I was so happy when I ended up in Matt's group. This may be just the chance I hoped for.

REFLECTIVE LEARNING JOURNAL - a record of the reflective thought and meanings you are making as you engage in learning experiences.

6/10/2007

We watched a video entitled "How to lie with statistics" in our lecture today. I was amazed at how easily data can be manipulated to back up whatever thesis is being proposed. Like other students, I wasn't aware that there are ways of interrogating statistical information to determine its reliability and validity. The book that goes with this video that Dr. O'Connor referred to sounds interesting. I think I'll ask her if I can take a look at it because I'd like to browse through it slowly on my own – especially before I tackle the assignment.

Although the people in the video sounded boring and banal it did illustrate the dangers of accepting statistical information at face value. I see more value now

than I did at the beginning of the lecture for our assignment. The group discussion was very lively today. I think the subject challenged some of our assumptions about backing up our ideas/opinions/arguments with ‘facts’ and ‘statistics’. I enjoyed this lecture and I think that the questions suggested in the video for interrogating statistics, which Dr. O’Connor summarised, will be very useful, not just for this programme, but throughout life. I for one will certainly be more skeptical when I next hear statistics being used in debates. I’ll certainly think twice before being taken in by adverts (e.g. for toothpaste/beauty products etc.) where ‘statistics’ are used as a marketing ploy!

Concluding remarks



Personal reflective learning journals will enable you to create a record of the connections and meanings you are making as you engage in learning experiences. The actual writing of the journal will consolidate the reflection process for you. Remember, you can use whatever format you are most comfortable with. You may want to use diagrams, pictures and colour. Or, you may wish to record your thoughts in an audio file. You could also engage in discussion with your friends and classmates prior to putting your thoughts in more concrete form. Ultimately, your journal should reflect your own experience and observations rather than quotations from academic texts. However, this is not to say that you cannot quote academic texts where this would help the reflective process e.g. relating theory to practice.

If you do not want to write/record a reflective journal you should still make every attempt to engage in the reflective process by getting into the habit of asking yourself the questions outlined earlier in this handout. Remember that reflection is also a mechanism by which you can show what you have learned and how you have done so (for both yourself and in assessments/assignments).

NB: NOTE

In some of your programmes you may be required to write a reflective learning journal as part of

your programme work. If this is being assessed and marks assigned as part of your programme grades it is *essential* that you adhere strictly to your School's expectations and requirements in this regard.

This unit is meant as an aid to writing a *personal* reflective learning journal. It is important to point out that if you elect to keep any sort of on-line journal, log, diary, etc. you must comply with DCU's appropriate usage policy and take responsibility for protecting your own privacy.

END OF UNIT: ACTION

Buy a notebook and begin your journey! You could start with the questions: 'What? So What? Now What?' as discussed in this unit. The next unit '**Creative thinking and critical thinking**' will enhance your ability to engage in the reflective process.