



What is Critical Reflection?

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Critical Reflection is the powerful process of making meaning out of a purposeful combination of experiences and academic content. It adds depth and breadth to meaning by challenging simplistic conclusions, comparing varying perspectives, examining causality, and raising more challenging questions.

Without critical reflection, students may come away from experiences and classes with oversimplified views of complex issues or cling to a single perspective, without considering a multiplicity of others. Critical reflection develops critical thinking skills, which are an essential college learning outcome.

More specifically, critical reflection is the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one's experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge. We often hear that "experience is the best teacher," but John Dewey and many others who have written about reflection remind us that experience can be, in fact, a problematic teacher. Experience without reflection can all too easily allow students to reinforce their stereotypes about people who are different from themselves, develop simplistic solutions to complex problems, and generalize inaccurately based on limited data. For example, students who do community service in a homeless shelter without critical reflection may come away with an impression like this: "Homeless people would be able to get off the street if they would just get a job." Dewey's definition of critical reflection is more nuanced and useful than the one in the first paragraph: "Critical reflection is the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1933, p. 9)

According to Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996), critical reflection is:

- *Continuous*- for the deepest learning to occur, reflection must be an ongoing component of the course. In the context of a particular experience, continuous means that reflection must occur before, during, and after the experience.
- *Connected*- reflection must connect experience with other areas of participants' learning and development. Connected reflection builds bridges between content learning, personal reflections, and first-hand experiences.
- *Challenging*- challenging reflection poses old questions in new ways, is designed to reveal new perspectives, and raises new questions. Nevitt Sanford's notion of balancing challenge and support is key to this component of reflection. If the reflection isn't challenging enough, if the environment is too supportive, then students will not learn and grow. If the reflection is too challenging and if adequate support is not provided, students will often retreat inside themselves and, thus, won't take the risks necessary for them to try on new ideas and perspectives.
- *Contextualized*- When designed with context in mind, reflection provides the link between thinking and doing, and preparing for doing again. The context of the experience should guide the choices about the forms and processes of reflection.

What, then, makes reflection *critical*? At first hearing, the phrase reminds us that reflection is a *critical* element of experience. There is no doubt about it: Reflection is essential and irreplaceable. It is also *critical* that reflection be done *well*. The term *critical* also links critical thinking to reflection. In the process of critical reflection, students become constructive critics of themselves, theories, policies, and society. They can learn how to ask and explore important, critical questions.

Critical questions challenge us to recognize complexity in issues that may seem straightforward. For example, to use an example from service-learning, when many young people confront homelessness for the first time, are sure that the people who are homeless are the ones to blame for their situation. They didn't "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," is what they often think. However, as they look deeper into root causes of homelessness, they raise critical questions about their original assumption and the deeper issues involved.

While it is important to talk about what critical reflection IS< it is also important to talk about what it is NOT.

- Reflection is NOT a didactic retelling of what happened, although this is a beginning step to understanding the meaning of actions and events.
- Reflection is NOT simply an emotional outlet for feeling good about oneself or for feeling guilty about not doing more, although consideration of our emotional responses to our experiences are useful and necessary.
- Reflection is NOT a time for soap-boxing, although learning how to express our political, moral, and civic passions in a public forum is important.
- Reflection is NOT a neat and tidy exercise that closes an experience; rather, reflection is ongoing, often messy, and provides more openings than closings.

References:

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