

Reflective Journal as assignment

Foreword

These materials were developed for the course Integrative Seminar 4: Societal Challenges (3803ISQPVY), an interdisciplinary 4 weeks course at the PPLE college (UvA). The course was taken by 183 2nd year students, and taught by 12 tutors. One of the prime learning outcomes of the course was formulated as “The student is able to reflect on his or her own biases and assumptions”. In relation to this learning goal, assessment was decided to stress *reflective writing* as prime means of training this skill. As appropriate formal Reflective Journal was chosen.

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Instruction materials for tutors

By asking students to write a reflective journal, we are not necessarily interested in academic writing, in ability to formulate congruent arguments, or eloquent text, but in the process of becoming aware of own learning process and questioning self.

What is the aim of reflective journal from the educators' perspective?

This assignment is based on an assumption that reflective writing can promote self-knowledge and thereby lead to critical thinking. The reflective journal is not an *end-goal* in itself but a *medium-that-enables-process* through which students will be encouraged to

engage with learning material on a more personal level. Nevertheless, the didactic aim is not to produce personal diaries, but to create an assignment that facilitates practicing *reflection and self-reflexivity*.

The students will be encouraged to write journal entries in order to (a) reflect on the course material/readings/lectures, and (b) to engage in self-reflexivity by 'turning back on oneself' and exploring own values, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, fears.

Note on terms: In this assignment for the purposes of instruction *reflection and reflexivity* are differentiated. This is done for the sake of helping students to produce more diverse entries, and include analysis of both: reflections about the learning material (readings, concepts, ideas covered in the classroom), and exploration of self and own learning process. To emphasize, it is the focus on the self and one's assumptions that distinguishes reflexivity from reflection on/about concept, idea, or event (Matthews & Jessel, 2006).

Learning goals of reflective Journaling

- To enable students observe own learning process, explain their reactions on specific content, and thereby deeply engage with the course content,
- To challenge students to *become aware* (consider/describe) own values, beliefs, standpoints,
- To challenge students to *examine* own values, beliefs, standpoints, and experiences,
- To lead students to *question, contextualize, and explain* on values, beliefs, standpoints,
- To create space and opportunities for students to improve (to see the need for transformative action),
- To enable students to differentiate between description and reflection,
- To enable students to distinguish between different levels of reflective practices (reflection and self-reflexivity),
- To enable regular practice of reflective writing.

Challenges for tutors?

Low quality of reflection has been identified by educators as one of the main didactic challenges of having Reflective Journaling as an assignment (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). Through my past three years of assessing similar assignments, I can closely relate to their conclusions. Few (optimal) strategies are proposed below to address this challenge in your class:

- Produce a short text through which you, as a tutor will show an example of similar writing (e.g. being reflective about course development, and self-reflexivity about your choice of the tutorial project),
- Address in class what is expected, and go through the grading rubric/categories (see: table 1) Categories are adapted from Gibb's reflective cycle
- After the end of the first week provide formative assessment (meaning only indicative grade, and feedback on how to improve, or encouragement to already good works).
- Discuss examples of poor/good reflections in class.

About grading rubric

The grading rubric was inspired by Gibbs reflective cycle. The categories have been adapted. Namely Feeling and Evaluation is substituted by Meaning. The last category is substituted by self-critique, which emphasizes self-reflexivity as an advanced level of reflection.

Source: Gibbs G (1988) *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford.

Instructions shared with students

What is Reflective Journal?

Reflective Journal is a personal record of your written reflections collected throughout the course. The aim of the journal is to help you train improve metacognitive skills; these are the abilities to reflect on own learning process and to translate experience into knowledge.

This learning tool will challenge you to examine own perceptions about the course, its content and the process of learning: to observe and explore own values, ideas and biases; and in a systematic way improve your critical thinking and self-knowledge.

Practicalities:

- Totally there are 7 entries in the Journal (weekly two entries during the first three weeks, and one entry in the last week).
- Deadlines: each Sunday at 23:59, unless set differently by the tutor.
- Corresponding questions are provided by the tutors.
- Precise requirements will be discussed in tutorials; on average entries are between 600-800 words.
- Academic writing is not a graded category but texts without spelling and grammar mistakes are expected.
- The primary learning goal of the journal is to aid you in developing self-critique, engage in reflection about the course content/process, and display self-reflexivity.

How will the Journal be graded?

Tutors will provide mid-term feedback on the journal (by grading the first two entries), and assess journal at the end of the course. Respectively, the grade for the journal will be composed of an average of these two marks.

See descriptions of grading categories in the Grading Rubric (see: Table 1).

Grading rubric for reflective journal

IS IV: Societal Challenges

Name of student:

Indicative Grade	Explanation of levels of assessment and feedback	
(D) = Below expectations; Grade >5.0	<p>Includes: Description Journal is written clearly and concisely. Student describes selected concept(s)/events or incidents without copious language mistakes.</p> <p>Missing: Thick descriptions¹, explanation of reactions (feelings/emotions), interpretation of meaning(s) and analysis of their relevance.</p>	{Insert Feedback}
(C-) = Poorly Meets expectations Grade >6.0	<p>Includes: Description Meaning Journal is written clearly and enriched by thick descriptions; it also conveys student's reactions to the instance under question (e.g. by describing how one felt, what emotions were triggered). The entry explains some nuances of meaning production. Missing – fails to explain why such reactions were triggered; falls short on analysis; still descriptive albeit better written.</p>	
(C+) = Fairly meets expectations Grade >7.0.	<p>Includes: Description Meaning Analysis Journal entries present concepts (events/incidents) using thick descriptions; convey clearly their meaning and one's reactions (feelings/emotions). In writing student also engages in examining why such responses were triggered. The student compares the chosen concept (event/incident) with other (dis)similar occurrences, and explains their relevance. Missing: awareness of broader socio-political and economic power dynamics/contexts/frameworks that might be relevant or detrimental for such meaning making process.</p>	
(B) = Exceeds expectations; Grade >8.0	<p>Includes: Description Meaning Analysis Evaluation Text is concisely but expressively written, uses thick descriptions, explains how meaning was created; elucidates what reactions/ thoughts and/or actions were evoked and why. Embeds analysis of the selected instance within broader socio-political, economic, or cultural contexts. Shows some awareness of underlying assumptions.</p> <p>Missing: elucidation of own position and self-reflexive engagement with implicit assumptions.</p>	
(A) = Far exceeds expectations; Grade >9.0	<p>Includes: Description Meaning Analysis Evaluation Self-critique Selected concepts (events/instances) are described briefly but analyzed extensively. The text elucidates the reasons why certain actions/or emotional responses were triggered; explicates student's position and compares it with previous dispositions, views, beliefs. Interrogates why those may have emerged. Shows awareness of socio-political, economic or cultural frameworks that might be at play in interpreting the concepts/events/incidents. Criticizes and reveals own implicit assumptions; proposes a new definitions/approach/ and or transformative action.</p>	

¹ "Thick description" as opposed to thin (superficial) description explains observed instance of social life through contextual and meaningful details. The term has been adopted from ethnographic inquiry (Geertz, 1973).

Examples of guiding questions provided to students

Example question #1 Reflection about lectures

Choose a concept/idea voiced during the lectures (and/or required readings) that that was the most invigorating (and/or) challenging, and explain why?

- Describe how does the chosen concept/idea relate to you as an individual/ your field of study/ or tutorial project. ·
- Compare and analyze, how this concept/idea relates to your (prior/current) views, standpoints, beliefs?
- How does the selected concept/idea challenge your practice/views/habits/beliefs?

Example prompt #2 Reflection about personal experience

Choose an event, situation or an issue that you have experienced in the first week of the seminars in the classroom, reconstruct your experience as a narrative, and explore your reaction to it; pay attention to what did this experience/situation taught and reveal about you?

- Describe what happened?
- Describe your reaction (how did you feel? Identify specific emotions; What was your reaction and why did this happen?)
- Analyze the situation/event in relation to your prior knowledge/feelings.
- Discuss 1-2 points from the course material that help you understand what happened. · Conclude what was your insight after this event/situation?
- What Have you learnt about yourself through this process?
- How will you approach the same or similar event/issue./situation in the future?

Suggested resources

The two articles provide good recommendations as well as literature review on using reflective journaling from educator's perspective

Janet E. Dymont & Timothy S. O'Connell (2010) *The Quality of Reflection in Student Journals: A Review of Limiting and Enabling Factors*, in *Innov High Educ* (2010) 35: 233.

Janet E. Dymont & Timothy S. O'Connell (2011) Assessing the quality of reflection in student journals: a review of the research, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16:1,

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