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Critical Reflection: A Foundation for Civic Engagement

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Introduction

Educators who engage in and advocate for experiential learning have long taken it as a given that reflection is an essential component of any experiential learning cycle. The standard assumptions around this approach to learning is that students come to a context with unexamined beliefs about how the world is or works, engage in an experience and related content which alters (or perhaps confirms) their understanding of the world, and that understanding becomes knowledge when the student reflects on and represents the experience. What becomes key in this set of assumptions, then, is to understand the role that reflection plays and what types of understandings we hope to promote through the practice of reflection. If we prompt students to "reflect" on their experience, we are often asking them to describe what they believe they have learned in order to confirm for them, and demonstrate for us, that there was, in fact, learning occurring. Yet, we would like to understand the activity of reflection itself as a learning process. Here we would like to explicate a framework for *critical reflection* that engages students in a meaning-making process, synthesizing their experiences in a way that

invites feedback and dialogue as it orients them toward future action. Such an approach to reflection, we argue, is rooted in a methodology that works from a critical, ethical foundation of praxis.

Literature Review

Whereas descriptive reflection allows students to consider any given experience, critical reflection pushes students to synthesize their experiences for a better understanding of agency, forward thinking, and engaging with different perspectives. However, the difference between the types of reflection often lack clarity, leading to confusion in implementation. Descriptive reflection allows students to focus on their growth personally, academically, and through skill building (Kiely, 2015). As a result, students' reflections come through as a product to be done at the end of or during the experience, such as an essay, journal entry, or application, rather than as a process that encapsulates the larger context of the experience and its effects on the student.

Beginning with a critique of assumptions and an understanding of one's value system allows for the meaning making process of critical reflection (Mezirow,

1990). Such a foundation leads to more active engagement (Schön, 1983) by the student that creates an awareness of their responses and a potential for change in perspective (Rogers, 2001). It is by understanding their worldview that students can analyze the perspectives of those around them (Mezirow, 1990). Through praxis, then, critical reflection fosters a better understanding of positionality, agency, and forward action (Foucault, 1982; Mezirow, 1990; Schön, 1983). Although experiences provide a way of learning, through engagement in critical reflection, students can conceptualize experiences as leading to contextual learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

"We came to a shared understanding and definition of critical reflection as a foundational practice, . . ."

Context

Working from an understanding of the distinction between descriptive and critical reflection, the staff at the Center for Civic Leadership sought to assess our programs, which are scaffolded from introductory level community-based learning to capstone level experiences, where students themselves seek to create change in partnerships with community organizations. To ensure that our scaffolded approach was allowing students to develop sophisticated reflective skills regarding civic development, we engaged in a critical evaluative process about our curriculum. In summarizing our process, we wish to highlight that the process itself led us to an articulation of a methodological framework for reflection that we in turn share with our students as the foundational value of critical reflection in practice and action.

The CCL's process began with a robust conversation about our expectations—what we as a center had defined as our mission and what we hoped to see in our students as they moved through our programs. Our next step was to analyze what our students were producing, but more importantly, the curriculum and ways we were structuring and communicating our expectations around what they produced. We had hoped our students' reflection artifacts would demonstrate a capacity for self-awareness in a critical fashion at the capstone level. Our initial findings, however, revealed that while we knew our capstone students were engaged effectively in critical community-based projects and were taking away valuable civic leadership skills, we were not giving them the opportunity through our formal reflection assignments to allow them to demonstrate the most fundamental skill they needed—critical reflective capacity. When we discovered that we were not capturing the complexity and depth that we were looking for in our practices, we turned to the literature and our colleagues in the field to gain perspective on reflection. We came to a shared understanding and definition of *critical reflection* as a foundational practice, and we focused on curricular revision in our programs to identify how to implement strategies to support our students in gaining proficiency in critical reflection.

Critical Reflection Cycle

Through the assessment of our programs, which demonstrated critical reflection as a tool for both faculty and students to critique, engage in feedback, understand oneself, and move forward
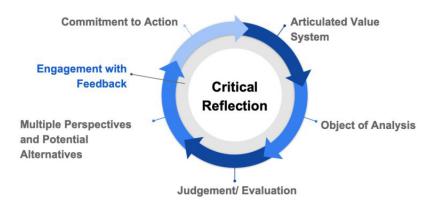
Figure 1. Critical reflection cycle

from that synthesis of understanding, we developed a critical reflection cycle as a process. Figure 1 reflects the steps within the process. In addition to being dialectic, the feedback loop embedded within the cycle allows for critical reflection to be a reiterative process. Using this cycle then, faculty can emphasize critical reflection as a process, and both faculty and students can understand the mechanisms behind the process, thus allowing for students to recognize critical reflection as a translatable skill.

Recognizing assumptions and values is the first step in the process for students to locate their positionality as they consider evaluative claims about an experience or other object of analysis. The object of analysis can be what best represents that moment of time; it could be one's self in action, an experience, or even the actions of others. Regardless of what the object of analysis is, the priority in moving towards this next phase is that the student begins with a strong understanding of their values to better understand that object. Awareness of positionality then leads to

judgement or evaluation as being understood in relation and connected to those values. Having come to an initial evaluation or judgement, the students consider the roles of different perspectives and alternatives to their thinking, which allows opportunity for nuance and alternatives. Navigating perspectives and judgements offers a basis for commitment. Finally, the commitment to action is what fully defines critical reflection as an action-based process oriented toward achieving a new understanding or shifting of perspectives going forward. Feedback throughout the process is central as it allows us to interact with students and encourage a two-way process of learning.

Conclusion and Contributions

The CCL has found value in this methodological approach to reflection: the approach provides a curricular tool to help students recognize reflection as a process; to engage in articulating their own values; seek multiple perspectives to challenge their assumptions; and to be open to continuous feedback as they synthesize their experiences. Here, however, we would like to also point out that

this turn to critical reflection processes allows not only for students to be more reflective, but to share deeper syntheses that enable us to understand their positionalities more fully and serve them better in our engagement with and feedback to them. Additionally, the artifacts that come out of these processes give us the opportunity to document, assess, and demonstrate to others what students are gaining from our programming. ■

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