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Self-reflection in the Course Evaluation

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Abstract

Self-reflection is a good way for students to learn about their experience, learning preferences and think critically about what they have learned. It is also a valuable source for teachers, too, since they can see whether their teaching was successful or not and on the basis of students’ reflection they can reconsider their teaching methods, strategies or activities. Therefore, this paper explores and discusses a concept of self-reflection and in particular a self-reflection essay, which was used as a form of evaluation in the Course of Academic Writing in the summer semester of 2013 among the students of the Faculty of Informatics and Management in Hradec Králové, Czech Republic. In addition, this article lists and explores benefits and drawbacks of the act of self-reflection. In conclusion, the author provides an example of guided questions for the development of a self-reflective essay.

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1. Introduction

The course evaluation is considered to be one of the very valuable tools of teaching and learning since it can provide useful feedback both for teachers and their institution about the quality of education. Moreover, it can reveal its impact on student’s learning and teacher’s practices. There are two main approaches to the course evaluation: informal/personal and formal/institutional.

The private one is done by the course teacher who reflects on his/her teaching practices in order to eliminate student’s insufficiencies and difficulties in the process of learning, reflect on one’s own teaching methods, approaches and strategies so that s/he could consequently improve his/her teaching performance. It can be done

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during the course (formative evaluation) or just at the end of the course (summative evaluation). The institutional one is usually done by the faculty administrators for different reasons. They make a (summative) evaluation in order to decide about the teacher’s prolongation or termination of his/her contract, promotion or a salary increase. In addition, they can make a (formative) evaluation in order to discover in which areas the teacher needs to improve. These evaluations can be combined with supervisor’s evaluations and results of student’s test scores to create an overall picture of teaching performance.

The evaluation can have different forms. Students can be given questionnaires (nowadays, it is usually done anonymously online) and/or focus interviews can be held. Sometimes, the evaluation can be done in form of student’s written reflection on the course in which student expresses an overall impression on the course, including his/her motivation for attending this particular course and realizing what s/he has learned.

Thus, an objective evaluation of the course should consist of:

Student results;
Self-reflection;
Teacher and/or peer review;
Institutional questionnaires and/or focus interviews.

1. Self-reflective Essay

The self-reflection as a form of the course evaluation is used in the Course of Academic Writing at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. The goal of a reflective essay is not only to discuss what one has learned but also to convey personal experiences and findings that have resulted (cf. Rogers, 2001; Spinello, 2013). Moreover, reflection can also be a bridge between experiencing and understanding or learning. As Race (2002) says:

Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we’ve learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-known pitfalls. Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general.

The reflective essay does not have any fixed format but it usually follows the structure of any other essay, mostly the formal one. That means the text of such an essay should consist of an introductory paragraph informing the reader about the topic. Then there are 2-3 paragraphs where the author expresses his/her own opinions and stanza. And finally, there is a conclusion which summarizes the key points of the whole essay. Sometimes, to increase a higher credibility the author can include references to some reliable sources. In addition, when introducing this form of evaluation, teachers should provide their students with some guidance or scaffolding before they let their students write. Appendix A lists some of the guiding questions for writing such a reflective essay. The questions were adapted according to Race (2002).

As far as the style is concerned, the reflective essay in comparison with other academic papers is written in the first person singular since it is based on personal experience of the writer himself/herself. But as it has been stated above, the tone of the essay should be formal.

In the Course of Academic Writing, students’ reflective essays are not included in the final mark. Students are just asked to reflect on what they have learned and experienced in the course in order to help to improve the course, including the teacher’s performance in the course (see Appendix B for an example).

However, as some research proves (cf. McAlpine and Weston, 2000, as cited in Harvey and et al., 2010), reflection is a mechanism for the construction of knowledge from experience although this knowledge does not necessarily lead to behaviour (better teaching) or link to student learning.

Nevertheless, the reflection can play an important role in the final assessment of student’s work. Philips (2006) lists the following advantages of a direct assessment approach:
• All students are encouraged to reflect, not just the better performing students.
• The reflection is signposted clearly to the students allowing students to be aware of their reflective ability and the process being undertaken; this is essential if they are going to transfer this skill.
• The reflection is measured / assessed along with other desirable learning outcomes.
• Students reflect academically in a subject-specific way as well as on employability, and therefore may learn by mistakes and uprate future learning. In other words, reflection is not limited to skills development but also to developing learning and understanding of the subject.
• Even students doing badly at a task are further encouraged to learn from it and may gain additional marks from their realizations.

2. Benefits and Drawbacks of the Self-reflective Essay

Besides enhancing student’s writing skills, the self-reflective essay brings about many advantages, both for the students and the teacher. Generally, the self-reflection is a good way for students to learn about their experience, experiences, learning preferences and think critically about what they have learned. It is also a valuable source for teachers, too, since they can reconsider their teaching methods, strategies or activities.

Thus, when writing an essay, students get enriched in the following ways:

• they become aware of their strengths and weaknesses;
• they expand their cognitive skills;
• they increase their metacognitive skills, particularly critically thinking skills;
• they develop their writing skills;
• they become aware of their learning styles;
• it helps students to develop their personality;
• it might encourage self-motivation or self-directed learning;
• it may make students more responsible for their learning.

Moreover, the reflective essay serves as a source of personal feedback for the teacher since it helps him/her to learn more about student’s personality, skills, shortcomings and also about his/her style of teaching. Furthermore, it helps him/her to discover student’s learning styles, reveal his/her fears or other emotional undercurrents in the process of learning, or identify student’s educational needs.

However, one also has to bear in mind the drawbacks of the reflective essay writing, which includes the fact that:
• some students can be too critical of teacher’s approaches;
• they may feel uncomfortable about it, or they may not have to reveal all their weaknesses and strengths;
• they might be reluctant to do such reflection.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, self-reflection is undoubtedly useful both for one’s personal and professional growth of an individual since it can enable individuals to identify their skills and limitations so that they can better understand and develop their skills (cf. Jasper, 2003). In so doing, they can become safer and more competent practitioners. As Biggs (1999, as cited in King, 2002) points out, reflection is indicative of deep learning, and where teaching and learning activities, such as reflection, are missing ..... only surface learning can result.

References


Appendix A. Guiding questions for writing a reflective essay of a course

1. What did I actually achieve while attending this course? Which were the most difficult parts, and why were they difficult for me? Which were the most straightforward parts, and why did I find these easy?
2. How have I developed my knowledge and skills?
3. What were 3 greatest challenges in doing this course?
4. What was the most boring or tedious part of doing this course? What are your recommendations for a possible improvement?
5. In what way did this course help me in my future learning and career?
6. What advice would I give a friend about to enrol in this course?
7. What have I learned about myself while doing this course?

Appendix B. An example of a student’s reflective essay

Academic Writing is a very useful subject which is not very popular among students. According to their attitude to Academic Writing, there are four groups of them. A lot of students do not even know about its existence. There are also many students who think they do not have enough skills to pass this subject. The third group is created by those who do not want to write five to six essays to get 2 credits only. However, there is also the fourth group where I belong. It consists of the students who have a close relationship to English and want to enhance it. What they also want is to learn something they did not at a secondary school, which is formal written English.

The lessons are being held once in a fortnight. On the one hand, it is a very pleasant fact ensuring that there is not much pressure on students. There is a little problem with this – no one ever knows it before s/he attends the subject. If this fact were more popularized, the subject could have more students. On the other hand, having the lessons every other week can make little difficulties in student’s timetables. But in my opinion, everyone can handle it. In this case, having the lessons once in a fortnight is more attractive than having them every week.

The subject is very valuable for the amount of useful and important information its students get. Honestly, there is hardly a student who knows at least a half of the rules taught in Academic Writing. How many students know what a linking word is? How many of them know where to put commas, capital letters? How to structure paragraphs, write quotations? The fact that short sentences should be used and many other important things. These are generally unknown facts that this subject teaches its students.

It is also nice that this subject is a bit like a conversation and grammar lessons. All the rules are often discussed and significant rules like articles are practiced. Neither silent, nor too vigorous lessons are what most people want.

Academic Writing is the most beneficial but also the most time demanding English I have ever come through in such a short time. Especially, the first lesson was like the water of life that suddenly made me advance significantly after three-year stagnation. It is definitely much less demanding to attend the conversation classes in English run by James White. I do not have to do anything there, only think a little, listen and tell stories. I get easy credits there,
have fun and learn a bit of grammar. And I can improve my conversational skills. The heart of matter of Academic Writing is somewhere else; it is aimed only at the people who want to improve in English.