THE ART OF REFLECTION

As a student in higher education, you are responsible for your own progress as an independent learner. You must of course take notice of and act upon formal feedback from your lecturers, but it is also important that you yourself think about (or REFLECT on) your learning. Increasingly, programmes of study explicitly require you to do this, but even if they do not, you can benefit from developing reflective skills yourself.

This leaflet will:

- Explain what being a reflective learner means
- Look at why reflection is important
- Suggest some ways in which you can develop as a reflective learner.

WHAT IS A REFLECTIVE LEARNER?

Reflective learners continually reflect on:

- What they are learning
- 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.

The reflection we are talking about here is on the learning you do at University or in other formal education, but it is worth noting that you can also reflect on learning in other spheres of your life, for example at work or at home.
WHY IS REFLECTION IMPORTANT?

- Thinking about your learning and writing things down helps to clarify your thoughts and emotions.
- Reflection also helps you to focus on your development as an effective independent learner, and on the strategies you use to work towards this.
- Your notes will become a record of your progress throughout your study. Reflection is a way of learning, not a method of assessment.

HOW CAN I DEVELOP AS A REFLECTIVE LEARNER?

Create a learning journal (or portfolio)

Use either a strong notebook or a ring binder, into which you can write your reflections on your learning. If you use a ring binder, you can slot your reflections, self-evaluation questionnaires and progress sheets (see below and page 4) into clear plastic wallets for safe keeping. This ring binder or notebook will become a portfolio of your progress in study and learning. For detailed advice on portfolios, please refer to the Study Advice Service leaflet of the same name.

What to write in your learning journal

Your learning journal should not be just a description of the topics and activities covered during a class session, although you may wish to include some brief background to put your reflections into context. The core of your learning journal should be your thoughts and feelings about your learning (see section on What is a reflective learner? on page 1).

Try to get into the habit of reflecting on your learning in all modules of your course, as well as on the learning that takes place in your life in general.

You can write in your learning journal, anything that helps you to reflect on your learning. Here are some examples of the sorts of things you may wish to write about:

- Your feelings about the course and your progress
- Your feelings about the lecturers and the other students
- Changes in your motivation or attitude towards your learning
- Your ideas about how you learn most effectively
- The things that challenge you; that you find difficult (and why)
- The things you find easy (and why)
- Your ideas (or strategies) for tackling tasks such as essay writing and exams. You may like to set yourself some targets for these tasks
- How different areas of your study are connected
- How your study and your developing skills relate to other spheres of your life.

[Adapted from Cottrell, 2003 (b): 67]

Tools to help you with your reflection

- Try to make constructive use of lecturers’ feedback on your work. Make sure that you understand what they are saying, and be prepared to ask them if anything is unclear. Once you have done this, list the improvements in more depth in your learning journal. These lists can be revisited at regular intervals.
• **Self-evaluation questionnaires and checklists** are useful tools to start you thinking about your skills. See Cottrell, S. 2003 (b) for several examples of these, which you can photocopy to use.

  • You will find it useful to devise your own **progress sheet** like the one in Cottrell, S. 2003 (b).

  Questionnaires and progress sheets should be filled in and kept in your learning journal/portfolio and revisited at regular intervals.

**More tips on reflection**

  • Don’t be too hard on yourself or underestimate your skills, but **be honest**. You often know more than you think you do. An example of this is the mature student who has been out of formal education for a few years, but who has a wide range of experiences and transferable skills that he or she can use in his or her learning.

  • **Think positively** about moving yourself and your skills forward.

**FURTHER READING**

These texts should be helpful to you, but learners with different learning styles may well find other titles more useful. Reflect on your own ways of learning - and find the best text for you.

COTTRELL, S. 2003 (a). *Skills for success: the personal development planning handbook.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter 7, entitled *The art of reflection*, covers the reflective process and reflective writing in detail. There are sections covering the different types of reflection, and others covering learning logs, progress files, portfolios and personal statements. Throughout the chapter there are useful self-evaluation activities and exercises you can try, and many examples of reflective writing.


This handbook contains many tools to help you with your reflections. They include the self-evaluation questionnaires and forms mentioned above, and a short section on reflective learning (pp. 65-67).

All web addresses in this document were correct at the time of publication.

**The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request.** Telephone 01482 466199

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