

CRITICAL REFLECTION

AUDIENCE: This resource is designed for TU Dublin lecturers interested in supporting their students to practice critical reflection

The aim of this resource is to help you:

- Introduce critical reflection to your learners as a key part of the learning process.
- Support learners' engagement in critical reflection using specific models.
- Support learners in beginning to reflect using reflective writing and reflective dialogue.

Why it's important:

Reflective practice encourages students to spend time considering the learning and experiences that make up their university life. It promotes cognitive engagement (leading to deeper learning) and allows connections to be made across the curriculum. Good reflection ultimately leads the student to asking and answering the question "How can I do better next time?"

Date last reviewed: August 2024

Original draft by Dr. Conor Mellon

What is Critical Reflection?

Critical reflection is a deliberate and systematic process of exploration and analysis aimed at deepening understanding, challenging assumptions, and fostering growth. For learners, critical reflection involves actively questioning and examining the content, concepts, and experiences encountered in their learning journey.

How can learners engage in critical reflection?

Engagement in critical reflection can be both individual and collaborative. It can be cultivated through various strategies such as journaling, group discussions, and self-assessment activities. Encouraging students to question assumptions, analyse diverse perspectives, and connect course content to real-world contexts fosters a deeper understanding of complex concepts. Additionally, educators can integrate reflective assignments into the curriculum, providing structured opportunities for students to articulate their thoughts, evaluate their learning process, and identify areas for further exploration.

There are a range of models that can support engagement in critical reflection. These models can be used to structure forms of reflective writing or to support a reflective dialogue between peers.

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle is a structured model that guides individuals through a systematic process of reflection, consisting of six stages:

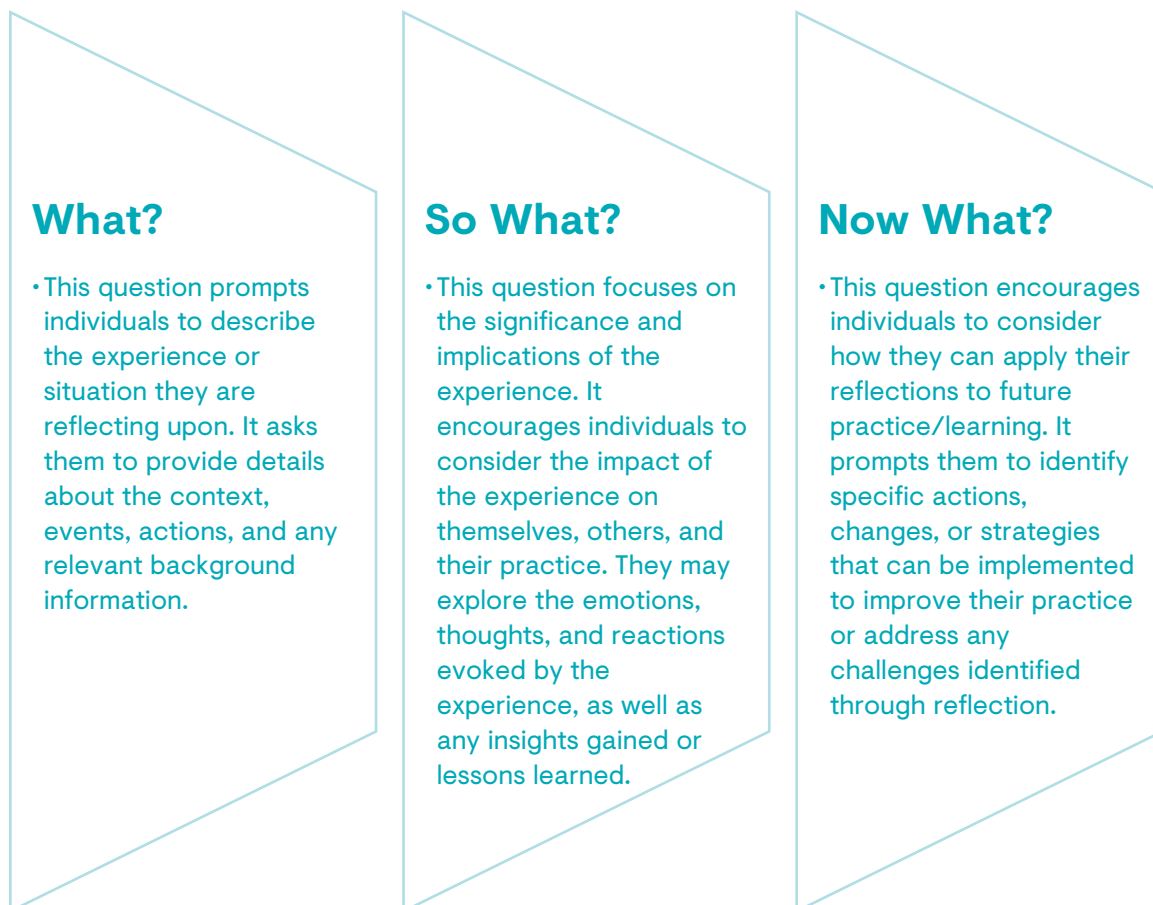
Description:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the experience you are reflecting on in detail. What happened? Who was involved? Where and when did it occur?
Feelings:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore your emotions and feelings during the experience. What were you thinking and feeling at the time? Consider both positive and negative emotions, such as excitement, frustration, confusion, or satisfaction.
Evaluation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyse the experience objectively. What went well? What didn't go well? Assess the outcomes and consequences of your actions. Did you achieve your goals? Consider the strengths and weaknesses of your approach.
Analysis:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on the experience more deeply. What factors influenced the situation? Consider the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values that shaped your actions and decisions.
Conclusion:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draw conclusions from your reflection. What did you learn from the experience? Identify key insights or lessons that you can apply in similar situations in the future.
Action Plan:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an action plan based on your reflections. What changes will you make as a result of this learning experience? Set specific goals and identify steps you can take to improve your skills, knowledge, or behaviour.

How can I use the Gibb's reflective cycle?

The prompts at each stage can be used to structure reflective writing. More experienced learners can use a [blank template](#) or those in need of more support can [use a template with built-in sentence starters](#).

Rolfe et al's., (2001) Reflective Model

This model consists of three main questions or prompts, which help learners explore and analyse their experiences in a methodical manner:



How can I use this model?

The prompts at each stage can be used to structure reflective writing. More experienced learners can use a [blank template](#) or those in need of more support can [use a template with built-in sentence starters](#).

Other useful models include DEAL (Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning), the Five R's (Reporting, Relating, Reasoning, and Reconstructing), and the Four F's (Facts, Feelings, Findings, Future). You can find a guide to [these models and a range of others here](#).

Further Guidance on Reflective Writing

Reflective writing can provide a structured framework for individuals to explore their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Through the process of reflective writing, learners gain insight into their learning journey and identify areas for

development. Educators can also leverage reflective writing as a pedagogical strategy to promote critical thinking, and self-directed inquiry among students.

Learners can engage in a range of reflective writing forms and activities. These include:



Key points for successful reflective writing:

- Accessibility is key. Writing can take many forms e.g., physical, digital, structured, unstructured etc.
- Authenticity is also crucial. Giving time and space to produce a genuine reflection will greatly benefit students' learning.
- Encourage learners to write regularly but not so often that it becomes a chore.
- Using prompts or templates when beginning to engage in reflective writing can help scaffold initial efforts. Gradually these can be removed as you grow in confidence.

The TU Dublin Library offers further guidance on reflective writing: [Reflective Writing - Reflective Practice & Reflective Writing - LibGuides at Technological University of Dublin - Library](#).

To support lecturers and students in beginning to reflect via writing you can access a range of simple templates [here](#) and some prompts in [this guide](#). These can be adapted to your needs and those of your learners. You can also offer a useful introduction for learners via this [short video from the University of Hull](#).

Reflective Dialogue

Reflective dialogue serves as a dynamic and collaborative process for learners to critically examine ideas and deepen understanding through shared reflection. Reflective dialogue emphasises active listening, open-mindedness, and mutual respect, creating a space for individuals to explore diverse perspectives, challenge assumptions, and co-construct knowledge. Educators can foster reflective dialogue with learners through a range of activities. These can include brief

exchanges between learners during class in the form of a think-pair-share or buzz group, or through more significant dialogues via the Socratic method or triadic reflective dialogue. Key points for successful reflective dialogue include:

1. Keep the learners informed as to why they're engaging in reflective dialogue – be explicit as to how it can support their learning.
2. Be clear on the ground rules when engaging in reflective dialogue. David Voelker from the University of Wisconsin-Green-Bay offers [a range of guidance on starting and sustaining reflective dialogue](#). These include asking learners to:
 - Listen carefully and use what you hear to help you reflect—rather than focusing on defending your own ideas.
 - If you have a natural tendency to “go on” in discussions, challenge yourself to listen rather than speak and try to be very selective about what you say.
 - If you have a natural tendency to be reserved and quiet in discussions, challenge yourself to share your thoughts with the group.
 - Keep in mind that the main goals of the reflective discussion.
 - Avoid the temptation to offer easy solutions to problems.
 - Feel free to ask questions of other participants but make an effort to keep these questions honest and open.
3. Revisit the ground rules you've established with the learners frequently and make any agreed amendments.
4. If using a more significant form of dialogue that is likely to take time and requires preparation on the part of the learner, then given them good notice this is happening.

Think-Pair-Share as Reflective Dialogue

Think-Pair-Share can be used regularly to allow learners to pause mid-lecture and reflect on questions, problems or other prompts before sharing their responses with other learners. However, it can also be used in a reflective capacity where they can be asked to reflect on their learning up to that point in the class or overall module, and what aspects have proven especially interesting or even challenging. If focusing on the latter the reflective dialogue should support the learners in finding a way forward to resolve these challenges.

Triadic Reflective Dialogue

Triadic reflective dialogue can be used at particular points in the overall module or programme to support learners to reflect on their learning journey up to that point and where they are going next. You can find a guide to this activity [here](#), but the over process involves:

1. Learners are given prior notice that they will engage in a dialogue about their learning journey in the topic, subject, module, etc. They should be given the questions that will support their discussion in advance. Possible questions might include those below but of course educators can limit the number or amend as necessary:
 - How would I describe my learning journey so far? How have I felt during this time?
 - Of what value is this learning? What is it doing for me now? What will it do for me in the future?
 - How did I learn best during this time? What was most comfortable? What was difficult?
 - What else do I need to learn? What future actions can I take?

2. In order to support the dialogue learners may bring along an artefact that says something 'key' about their journey e.g., a sample of work, an image, a resource, an object, etc.
3. Each participant is given the same length of time e.g., 10 minutes, to engage in a discussion on their experience. Another participant acts as the facilitator, where they pose the above questions, but they can also go further here, clarifying points, asking how they felt, or took particular actions. The facilitator should also support the speaker through a resolution or toward future actions.
4. The other participant in the discussion should keep a detailed record, noting down key responses and ideas. Over the course of the dialogue, the three learners each take up the role of narrator, facilitator, notetaker. By the end of the discussion there is a detailed record of the three interactions that they can all look back over and aid their overall reflection on the process.
5. This record can also support any individual reflective writing, and it can contribute to a learning/reflective portfolio. It can even act as a stimulus for the next triadic reflective dialogue, where the group can revisit key points and check in on the planned actions.
6. At the close of this dialogue the educator should facilitate a whole-group discussion around the experience and the learners' thoughts on areas of the process for further refinement or consolidation.

Want to know more?

These additional resources may be useful

University College Cork - [Guide to Reflective Writing](#)

University of Cambridge - [Reflective Practice Toolkit](#)