Online guided reflection sessions: getting learners to think about the process of learning

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Presentation abstract

This 20-minute presentation showcased a series of 'guided reflection' sessions which have been used to support the social, emotional, and academic development of foundation year students at the University of Surrey. This group of students arrive at university having not obtained the necessary grades for direct entry onto the first-year undergraduate programme and they report difficult relationships with study and often have fixed beliefs and academic behaviours. This may impact their progression if learners hang on to previously unsuccessful academic behaviours which are also, sadly, likely to reinforce their beliefs about their own academic potential.

With this in mind, online reflective sessions were developed to encourage learners to consider their beliefs and the current, relevant academic behaviours that they are engaging with on their programme. The aim was to create a safe space for learners to share experiences and support each other as well as to develop reflective writing skills which would form part of an assessment. The theory which inspired this practice includes the pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2020), and thoughts from Webster (2023) about the importance of discussing process and approach with learners. This presentation demonstrated the simple virtual platforms used to create this collaborative online space using real examples of reflective writing from foundation year students (with written consent provided by learners in line with the university's ethical standards). These examples furnished discussion of the potential for online, anonymous spaces to become places of social and emotional (as well as academic) growth for learners. In addition, the presentation considered the key role that the learning developer plays in facilitating deeper reflection and self-empowerment in learners, drawing on expertise gained from offering

one-to-one support. The presentation concluded by inviting discussion of some potential avenues for further development of this practice.

Keywords: reflection; learning approach; learning process; online learning space; self-empowerment; academic growth.

Community response

Reflection is a tool commonly used by academics, coaches and other practitioners. However, it can be a tricky subject depending on the perception of the student/individual reflecting. While there are a range of benefits of reflection like self-awareness, and personal growth, there are risks associated with reflection like negative bias, confirmation bias, emotional discomfort to name a few. It is beneficial for individuals to engage in guided reflection as there is availability of structure and objectivity. This process can help individuals gain deeper insights, avoid personal biases, and receive constructive feedback. Additionally, accountability and skill development can be fostered, leading to more consistent and meaningful reflection.

The session was found to be insightful and thought provoking by the attendees.

As highlighted by Alexander MacDonald below, the presentation on guided reflection led attendees to reflect on their daily practice within the field of learning development and education. It was an excellent source of ideas for professional development.

> Laura's session, and from what I could gather, her professional approach really made me consider my own practice as a learning development practitioner and educator. Laura's practice felt clearly underpinned by a coaching approach whereby she didn't just invite learners to answer questions, she empowered them to come up with their own. Her piecemeal approach to building her students' capacity to approach both themselves and their learning with curiosity resonated with me on so many levels. As someone who's relatively early in their career as a learning developer/academic, this brought the concept of co-designing the curriculum to life in a way I hadn't considered but will most definitely adopt moving forward (AM).

Reflection can be a useful tool in growth and development on a wider level. Alice Stinetorf highlights below the importance of formulating relevant questions not just for students but for academics as well.

> One valuable 'lightbulb moment' for me during this session was the realisation Laura shared about asking the right questions. Within the intervention she discussed, she wrote the questions for students to respond to, initially, but then had the revelation that *they* needed to develop the skill of reflective questioning: otherwise, this wouldn't become a practice they could initiate by themselves, for themselves. Therefore, Laura pivoted and started to have the students design their own questions for reflection. I realised this matter of *identifying the need to ask a question* and then *formulating a relevant question* is something I need to consider more actively as an academic writing specialist, so I look forward to mulling over the ways we might help students to grow that practice (AS).

Reflection can have a negative perception and is not suitable for all situations. As highlighted by Nicola Tomlinson below, the dark side of reflection is an equally essential area of consideration when planning learning experiences.

> A particularly key takeaway from Laura's presentation for me was the challenge of the 'dark side of reflection' – that when facilitating reflection, we should be aware of the risk of reflection being set up as a 'stick to beat ourselves up with'. I really value this criticality, and the fact that Laura highlighted that we don't want to promote the idea to students (and ourselves!) that everything can be or needs to be fixed – that it's also key to use these sessions to reflect on the things that are going well. This perspective ties in with a strengths-based approach that I aim to use to frame my own teaching practice – to build students' self-efficacy by encouraging them to focus on the strengths that they already possess (NT).

Next steps and additional questions

Learning and development professionals have a unique set of skills that are relevant to creating and engaging in reflective practice-based sessions. It will be interesting to investigate the wide-ranging impact of reflective practice for students. Additionally, how

useful is reflective practice for encouraging students to take ownership of their behaviours and make long lasting changes?

Author's reflection

After presenting this session, I had conversations with other delegates where I tried to explain why I had wanted to work on reflection with my students in the first place and in particular, why I felt like I was living up to my values as a learning developer in my one-to-one practice, but less so in my classroom sessions. I felt like I was able to get students to think about the *process* of learning more easily in one-to-ones than in the classroom. Often, when I try out something new in my practice, this is something that happens: I have an idea that something might work but I can't always articulate why I think it will be helpful. These conversations with delegates after the sessions really helped me realise why I wanted to run the online reflection sessions.

I think that in my other, non-reflective workshops, I do have some elements of good practice; we think a lot about the 'perception of the task', the 'pertinent factors', and certainly the 'product' as we often look at exemplars and do some collaborative writing and mind-mapping as a group. These are activities which are in-line with the 5Ps of LD as put forward by Webster (2023). But I realised that I often felt that the 'process' element was missing because, often, all I have the time to do with my learners in the classroom is work with them ahead of an assessment or study task. We never seem to get time to think back on how something has gone, together, as a group. Unless, of course, I do something like these sessions and make the space for that. I think this was why I wanted to do these sessions; I had an awareness that I somehow needed to close the loop on aspects of learning. Presenting this session has allowed me to figure this out, and now I can hopefully use this understanding as a way of justifying and explaining to programme leads and module convenors the value of these sessions in order to promote them further.

On another note, some useful feedback I got on the day related to the name of the sessions – this conversation arose when we were thinking about the attendance to the sessions which is poor. I call the sessions 'Online Guided Reflection sessions' which I used to try to evoke the notion of 'Guided Meditation', something my psychology students will be familiar with. I think the idea of rethinking the name is a valid point here; it is

possible that some students are going to look at the phrase 'reflection' and might almost reflexively reject the idea if it raises uncomfortable feelings. So this is worth spending some time thinking about.

In response to the comment by Alice above about encouraging students to ask the right questions; I think Alice is helping me take this idea even further. I did realise that the questions needed to come from the students, and therefore formulating the right questions was a skill I wanted them to develop. But Alice also mentions here 'identifying the *need* to ask a question', and this is interesting to me and got me thinking. Identifying the need to ask questions (at all) is an idea that I can imagine the students picking up on quickly in these reflective sessions as they start to write their own prompts, within the context of the session, probably thinking about their reflection assignment. But there could also be an opportunity here to reflect on this skill (asking questions of ourselves) in general and how it could be helpful in *other* contexts. For example, being able to check in with ourselves in all kinds of situations (not just on Padlet) or using questions to help solve problems (I'm considering critical thinking here), or for encouraging creativity. These could be ideas and messages that I could weave throughout the sessions where I am encouraging the students to write their own prompts, for example. 'At what other times do we think it might be useful to ask ourselves questions in this way?'.

Often, I find my foundation year learners depend on being given all the information they need, and not receiving their education in this way is one of the most significant parts of their transition to university level study. I am always asking myself – how can I encourage the students to ask more questions of *themselves* when they get stuck? I feel like there is a possibility to think about this issue too, with these online reflection sessions.

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Laura Hamilton is a lecturer in Learning Development at the University of Surrey, working chiefly with the Psychology foundation year programme. Laura has worked in the field of Learning Development since 2017 at various different HEI's across the country. Her interests include working in partnership with lecturers to integrate learning development opportunities into the curriculum and learning from one-to-one work with students as a way to improve her practice and empower learners to develop their academic confidence during their time at university.

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