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Reflection: At the Heart of Experiential Learning

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Robert Shumer

REFLECTION: AT THE HEART OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Life is nothing but a series of experiences. Many experiences pass us by, quickly forgotten. Others make an impact, for some reason, and we remember them well. How we deal with our experiences measures how much we can learn from them: whether we think or reflect on what has happened determines if an experience will be lasting and rewarding or simply slip into oblivion.

The role of reflection in learning has been discussed for centuries. Sophocles believed we learn primarily by doing --by observing what we do time and time again. Locke suggested that we must reflect on what we do to understand. Knowing is purely a function of thoughtful reaction to experience. In modern times Dewey has observed that learning from experience is based on reflective periods, periods without action, where connections are made between one experience and another. It is the thoughtful process of connecting past and present learning derived from experience that prepares people for the future. This linkage is referred to as "continuity of experience" and is considered the basis of human growth by Dewey.

David Kolb, borrowing from Kurt Lewin, has described the role of reflection as part of the experiential learning cycle. The process moves from experience, to reflection about the experience, to formulation of generalizations or patterns, to testing of generalizations through new experiences. We learn primarily from thinking about experiences and testing them in new situations.

What makes experience educational, however, is not limited only to the reflective process, but the nature of the reflection. One can reflect in many different ways on an experience: cognitive, where there is an attempt to understand specific knowledge; affective, where there is an effort to understand emotional influence; judgmental, where one examines values and personal involvement.

Reflection has been defined in other ways. Mezirow (1981) has identified several categories of reflectivity which occur during experiences: affective, discriminant, judgmental, conceptual, psychic, and theoretical. Each form focuses on a different level of understanding and describes how experience influences our cognitive, as well as our emotional, state of mind.

Reflection is also viewed as a three part process (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985). These researchers believe we have an

experience, then return to the experience by thinking about it, attend to feelings about the experience, and then re-evaluate what occurred. We learn more about the experience each time it is revisited.

Educational institutions, in developing experiential education programs, appear to categorize the value of the learning by the kind of reflection promoted. Some programs focus on the conceptual process where people become conscious of ideas inherent in actions. Others focus on our feelings or our value judgments, while still others examine knowledge about immediate causes as to how we function. Perhaps the most general form of reflectivity, theoretical, delves into the reasons for perceptions and habits and allows for the greatest potential application of learning.

A proposed framework, listed below, identifies differences in program attributes and reflective processes and suggests reasons why some programs are held in high esteem while others are perceived to be of lesser value. The central factor seems to be the amount of theoretical reflectivity that takes place in the program and the type of readings and writing required.

The framework put forth is simply a model for discussion and needs to be tested for accuracy. However, it does provide a structure by which to examine experience-based educational programs in various settings.

REFLECTION MATRIX
 TYPES OF REFLECTION USED IN VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:

TYPE OF REFLECTION

	Specific Tasks	Specific Principles	General Principles	Academic Principle or Theory	Affective	Judgment	Other
<u>TYPE OF ACTIVITY</u>							
<u>Field Activity:</u>							
Job Experiences							
Perform specific task							
Interview people about jobs							
Other:							
Career Experiences							
Observe various occupations							
Interview people about careers							
Other:							
Class assignments							
Observe specific phenomenon							
Compare/Contrast activities with readings							
Other:							
Recreational activities							
Specific skills							
Appreciation of environment							
Team play							
Physical endurance and strength							
Other:							
<u>Reading Assignments</u>							
Job Preparation							
Job specific skills							
Job trends							
Other:							
Career Information							
Labor market info.							
Career description							
Other:							

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	TYPE OF REFLECTION						
	Specific Tasks	Specific Principles	General Principles	Academic Principle or Theory	Affective	Judgment	Other
<u>Academic Subjects</u> (topics about)							
English							
Social Studies							
Math							
Science							
Business							
Music							
Art							
Other:							
<u>Writing Activities</u>							
Job specific topics							
Career assessment							
Journals							
Descriptive essay							
Analytic papers							
Essays comparing field work with literature							
Other:							
<u>Seminar/Classroom Topics</u>							
World of work							
Career information							
Job skills							
Personal growth							
Values							
Interpersonal skills							
Academic topics (English, math, social studies, science, etc.)							
Theories of human, and/or physical behavior							
Other theories							
Other:							

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DEFINITIONS FOR REFLECTION MATRIX

Specific Tasks: This term refers simply to thinking about a specific task in the field. A good example of this might be a student learning how to operate a ten key adding machine. The student might reflect on the order of pushing the keys, or how to advance the tape. It might also involve thinking about the act of addition or subtraction. In each case, the reflection is immediate and focused on performing a single task.

Specific Principles: This term involves thinking about how specific tasks join together in some pattern or sequence. As with the example above, the principle to be reflected upon might be how numbers are added together to form a balance sheet. Another specific principle might involve rules of addition or subtraction: stating principles of numbers or place.

General Principles: The concept to be conveyed in this area involves understanding how specific principles combine to portray a general pattern or behavior. As with the above example, this might involve understanding how balance sheets are used to maintain an accounting of funds for a business. Another general principle might include how adding machines operate to process various mathematical functions.

Academic Principle or Theory: Reflection in this domain includes understanding the big picture or general patterns or rules of behavior. Using the ten key adding machine example, an academic principle or theory might relate to how businesses (at the micro level) or economies (macro level) account for income and expenditures. This includes understanding such concepts as debit, credit, balance, income, etc., which serve as building blocks for the theory or academic principle. Theories of accounting would be included in this domain.

Affective: This term refers to reflection about personal feelings about a task or sequence of tasks. This would include whether or not you like the experience, are saddened by it, or are enthused about it. In any case, the experience influences the emotional state and forces the person having the experience to examine the question: how do I feel when I am having this experience?

Judgment: Every experience can produce an evaluation as to

whether or not the activity is to be continued or not. This involves assigning a value to the experience, such as "this is helping me, so I should continue." Judgments refer to thoughts about whether the experience is bad or good, needs to be changed, or requires modification to continue. This type of reflection includes measuring an experience against past experiences to determine future value to the individual.

Other: Since the above definitions are not absolutely discreet or separate, it may be possible to devise reflective processes which combine elements of the above mentioned activities or define new ones. This is an opportunity to think about various tasks and activities and try to place them in a newly defined category. Performing this analysis might be construed as an "academic reflection"!

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