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Critical Reflection is More than Just Looking in a Mirror

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Instructional Design

"Magic mirror on the wall--who is the fairest of them all?" spoken by the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).

Looking in a mirror (and most of us don't have a magic mirror!) provides us only with a surface reflection of how we look – not who we are or what we've learned. In this blog post, we'll look at what critical reflection is and its importance in a learning experience.

Reflection and Critical Reflection

As designers of learning experiences we sometimes design activities/assignments that require our students to reflect. To understand why we would even consider reflection, we can examine the literature, beginning with the theories John Dewey expressed a century ago in his book *How we Think* (1910; 1933). Dewey (1933) stated "Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, **constitute reflective thought**" (p. 118) (emphasis mine). Following Dewey, the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) describes how experience is transformed into learning through a cycle of learning involving experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. Kolb & Yeganeh (2011, p.3) state, "This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner 'touches all the bases'—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned." They include the following graphic, familiar to many of us, of the learning cycle.

Figure 1 Kolb & Yeganeh (2011, p. 4)

However, reflection is not easily defined. Levels of reflection have been identified in the literature, defining critical reflection and differentiating it from reflection and non-reflection. Kember, et al (2008) identified four categories or stages as they sought to define critical reflection:

- Habitual action/ non reflection: this takes place when the learner takes action (or responds) without significant thought.
- Understanding: the learner is seeking to understand the meaning of the concept but is not reflecting on the information being presented.
- Reflection: this can be as simple as looking back on an experience, or, the learner considers new information *in relation to* previous knowledge or experiences resulting in personal meaning and new personal insights.
- Critical reflection: a change or transformation of perspective takes place within the learner as a result of critiquing a previously held assumption and the premise on which it was defined (Mezirow, J. 1998).

Liu's (2015) definition includes: Critical reflection is a process of constantly analyzing, questioning, and critiquing established assumptions.

RMIT College of Design and Social Context define critical reflection on their website as: Critical reflection is a purposeful activity for making considered changes and improvements to practice, knowledge and meanings made from learning. Values influence the ways in which people think and interact with the world. When students engage in critical reflection they are open to challenge and modification of values, knowledge and behavior. (para 1).

Multiple authors have proposed that critical reflection promotes learning (Mezirow, 2006; Vanhear, 2013). Winnie and Perry (2000) believe that critical reflection helps the learner to connect current learning (and situations) to previous knowledge (and experiences) therefore deepening the understanding of the learner. A variety of authors believes that there is a need for increased critical reflection in higher education in response to the needs of learners in the 21st century (Vanhear, 2013; Cowan, 2006; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Brockbank & McGill, 2000). Mezirow (2006) proposes that one of the major elements of transformative learning is critical reflection.

Critical reflection helps us to see and understand multiple perspectives, make new connections between our ideas, experiences, and thoughts, find flaws or strengths in our solutions to problems, think about alternative outcomes, consider new or additional applications, and gain meaning from an experience. Through critical reflection, we are able to transform experiences from mundane, meaningless activities to deep, meaningful learning. Isn't deep, meaningful learning the goal for us as we design learning experiences?

This leads me to additional questions…

The writings of these leaders in educational thought lead me to more questions: How often do we purposefully integrate critical reflection into learning experiences we design? If this is an integral, essential element of the learning process as explained by these leaders, are we short-changing learners if we do not include purposeful, critical reflection activities/assignments in every course, training, workshop or other learning experience into our design?

When I design learning experiences I always propose that we include critical reflection activities/assignments. While not all SMEs agree, what I can do is recommend and provide supporting evidence for the importance of critical reflection.

What are your thoughts on the subject?

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