

Note from instructor: I use this as a guide for a critical reflection component of a course. Students are asked to respond to two questions from each section (400 – 500 words each). Following that, the groups meet with me for an oral reflection exercise where they know in advance that I will be asking them any of the questions that are in this document.

CRITICAL REFLECTION – an integral component to experiential learning

“Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and syntheses”

(Association for Experiential Education)

Critical reflection is an integral component of experiential learning connecting the *learning* to the *experience*. To reflect in experiential learning means to think critically about and analyze emotional responses to experiential activities in the context of course content and the learning objectives of a particular course or curriculum.

- Reflection is intellectual work that differs from the dominant academic culture by intentionally engaging the whole person, connecting experiences with academic content, and cultivating students’ awareness of themselves.
- Reflection is critical thinking that supports learning objectives by expecting students to make astute observations, to demonstrate inductive or deductive reasoning skills and to consider multiple viewpoints, theories, and types of data.
- Reflection is an activity that contributes to the creation of educational environments in which a diverse population of students thrives by acknowledging the influence of people’s identities and contexts and inviting students to construct and share their own sense of meaning.
- Reflection is not a didactic retelling of the events of an experiential learning activity.
- Reflection is not simply an emotional outlet for feeling good about doing something or for feeling guilty about not doing more.
- Reflection is not an exercise that closes an experience; reflection is ongoing and provides more openings than closings.

(adapted from www.servicelearning.org)

Critical reflection can take place before, during and/or after an experiential learning activity. Examples of post-reflective assessments include journals, portfolios, reports, papers, discussions, presentations, performances, photo-essays, interviews, etc. There are many ways reflection can be presented including oral reflection, written, individual, and group; reflections often make use of the arts, multi-media, games and simulations, stories, case studies, role-plays and many other activities which enhance learning.

There are several types of reflection that are useful to engage the student in order to optimize learning *after* an experiential learning activity. The sample questions below are

basic and broad in nature. They are meant to provide a guide as to how critical reflection may be structured.

Cognitive reflection examines the ***new knowledge and skills*** the students gain from their experiential activity. This includes the kind of learning that is addressed in the curriculum. Sample questions:

- Were the goals and objectives of the experiential activity accomplished? Describe your experiential activity relating it to its goals and objectives.
- How has your experiential activity related to the readings, discussions, and lectures in your courses? Provide specific examples of related course concepts and describe the context in which the concepts related to your experiential learning activity.
- Did your understanding of course material/concepts you have studied improve as a result of your participation in this experiential activity? Provide examples. What complexities do you now see in the concept that you were not aware of before?
- Did your understanding of the experiential activity improve as a result of the course material/concepts you have studied? Provide examples.
- In what specific ways are concepts of course material you have studied and the experience the same and/or different?
- Upon reviewing the experience, identify and describe an example of a different approach (e.g., decision or action) you could have taken. Envisage the impact of such a change.
- What additional questions need to be answered or evidence gathered in order to judge the adequacy/accuracy/appropriateness of a concept you have been taught when applied to the experience?
- How can you educate others or raise awareness about this experiential activity?
- What new skills have you learned since beginning your experiential activity?
- What are the most important learning moments you take with you from this experience?

Affective reflection looks at ***what students feel*** as a result of their experience. How has this experience changed their attitudes or opinions or sensitivities? Sample questions:

- Would you do this again? Why?
- Has this experience changed you? If yes, how?
- What values, opinions, beliefs have changed for you?
- Describe what you have learned about yourself as a result of your experiential activity.

Process reflection considers *what students learn from the process itself*.

Examples include how to work with others and understanding the consequences of actions. Sample questions:

- What expectations did you have about your experiential activity? Do you have a different picture of your experience than you had before you began it?
- What would you like to change about your experience?
- What were the benefits from participating in this experiential learning activity?
- Did anything surprise you? If so, what?
- What did you do that seemed to be effective? What were your personal contributions to the experiential activity?
- What did you do that seemed to be ineffective?
- What were the most difficult parts of the experiential activity? Why?
- What were the most satisfying parts of the experiential activity? Why?
- What have you done in this experiential activity to make a difference? What impact do you think you have had?
- What type(s) of a role did you endeavour to fulfill during the experiential activity? Examples include leader, collaborator, challenger, creator, team-builder, innovator, etc. Were you effective within this/these roles?
- If you worked within a team, identify and describe your approach as a team member. Was it effective? Why?
- What do you think was your most valued contribution to the experiential activity?
- How do you see your role with this experiential activity? How does that compare with how others may see your role?
- What personal characteristics made this experiential activity successful?
- Identify and describe an awareness about a personal characteristic that has been enhanced by reflection on your experiential learning activity.
- How does the experiential activity relate to your long-term goals?
- How have you been challenged?

In summary, reflection is an essential process for transforming experiences - gained from the experiential activities and the course materials - into genuine learning. Reflection is crucial for integrating the experience with the course material. It enhances students' critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to assess their own values, goals, and progress.