



Reflection: Changing the Learning Environment



I teach General Education composition classes to first year undergraduate students, which can make my job challenging before students even step into my class. Students often think that taking required courses is something they “*have to get through*” in order to take classes related to their major. However, practices learned in general education classes can set the tone for successful learning beyond the classroom. Although, telling that to students does not automatically win them over; they have to discover it for themselves. The practice that changed the student experience in my own composition classes was the frequent use of reflection to help students think through everything we did.

To get started, we developed our own customized literacy narratives. The semester began by focusing on students and their personal experiences with reading and writing. One of the first questions I ask them is, “What is the last book you read?” This is a hard question because students want to list a required reading book that they may or may not have completed in high school to make a good impression. But if they want to make progress throughout the semester, they have to take an honest look at themselves and their own experiences with reading and writing—this way they can value the journey they will take in their first college composition course.

Once students realize the purpose of this initial reflection is to set a benchmark for them to reflect on and grow from, they tend to include some very honest entries. Often, identifying with a negative experience in the past can keep a student from enjoying a class. Tara, a student, shared, “*When it came to writing growing up, I remember struggling to keep up. I would write those graded writing prompts that every student had to write and remember receiving [sic] a lower score than my friends and lying to them when they would ask what score I got because I was embarrassed [sic] that I couldn't [sic] write as well as them.*” She is bringing an honest experience to class, which makes this required class one she may not be eager to take.

Additionally, my enthusiasm for reading is not always shared by my students on the first day of class. Alexis very clearly shared her feelings in her writing, “*Besides reading in school, I was never a big reader in my free time. It was one of those things that you would have to get forced to do. I hated it more than the dentist. My mom always tried to take me to the library, but I always came out with nothing.*” This is what Alexis thought as I introduced a novel the class would be reading during the semester.

These initial reflections do not always reveal negative experiences. Some students do not know where they gained their skills, as Jared states, “*I am actually surprised my reading level is the way it is now, considering I did not read much at all as a kid, and even now I don't read much, just articles online.*” His comment shows the beginning thinking pertaining to his reading skills, thinking that can be expanded as he reads and writes throughout the semester. In the same reflection, Jared continued this thinking and also set goals for the semester, “*I never got into the habit of planning my writing before I write, so that is one of my goals in college, to change that way of thinking/writing.*” Reflections lead to goal setting (Yancey), and students' initial reflections can illustrate discoveries of personal challenges with a discipline, identification of known skills, and goals for the semester.

Starting with reflection puts the focus on the students and their goals for the class. While an initial written reflection fits logically into a composition class, it can be used to get students thinking about any course they are beginning.

The composition course I teach includes students writing three essays—personal narrative, analysis, and research—and reading a novel together as a class. As students complete each essay or reading response, time is set aside for reflecting, not only on that assignment but also to consider how completing that assignment fits into the course plan and their learning plan. I encourage students to question everything. Authentically discovering that a course is planned purposefully will help students value it. These reflections give students time to think through the course plan, but more importantly, to use metacognition to advance their personal learning.

Reflection happens throughout the semester so students are actively involved in thinking about the class and what helps them. After writing a response to the novel we read, Gianna said the writing portion helped her with the reading, “*I personally enjoyed writing journals because it allowed me to work more on my reading comprehension. I was able to decode the quotes by who said it, who it was to, and the context.*” Gianna was able to see that she was more engaged with understanding the reading when she wrote about it after.

Focusing on their personal writing process can help students identify their strengths and weaknesses. Kaden discussed his writing, “*What hinders my writing is really just getting too fancy. I try too hard to make it sound perfect. If I just type and make changes later, I'd be better off. My best method for writing, and what helps me greatly, is to just write.*” He recognized what was causing him to get stuck in his writing process.

Sometimes, students are able to write, but then face challenges during the revision process. Xander explained the work did not stop after his first draft was written, “*The creation of my essay took a lot of work. The first draft I created was a whole lot different than my final draft. At first I had just pumped all the information I found on my categories in one massive paragraph, but as we moved on, I realized that it's easier to read and actually easier to create an essay when you break it up into smaller paragraphs that are more specific and then move on to another paragraph explaining something related but also different.*” These students are writing about different aspects of our class, but each reflection is personalized and reveals the students' growing knowledge of their own learning process.

Once I started using frequent reflection in my composition courses, the questions about *why* students had to take the class stopped. Through their own reflection about what they did in class, they could see the purpose of each assignment. Being able to identify and verbalize challenges helped students recognize roadblocks and develop tools for going beyond those roadblocks. In “Teachers: Know When to Stop Talking,” Newkirk discusses the importance of giving students time to express and develop their ideas. I have learned more about facilitating student learning by listening to what students say and reading what students write.

Reflection provides insight not only to students, but also to teachers. The more information I can gather about what is getting in the way of student learning, the better prepared I am to help them meet their goals (Hughes). However, with reflection, students are taking more responsibility for their learning, so the student-teacher relationship is cooperative and productive. This practice is not limited to composition classes as teachers of many disciplines can incorporate metacognitive strategies to promote learning.

In many cases, a teacher only has one semester to teach a student and help that student learn. How that happens is crucial to the student's overall learning. Using reflection reiterates that students are the main focus of the course, and frequent reflections help students grow as learners. Although students go on to take other classes, they often take the learning and their personal goals with them. Here, Jack explained, “*I feel I have made large strides this year in improving my writing. My ability in gathering information and organizing it into a paper has gotten a lot better since the beginning of the semester. I now know that I need to put in the extra time in the beginning to help myself later in the writing process. I still need to work on adding more information to what I have, and I will continue to try and improve this. I think this class has had a very positive impact on my writing ability and I am very glad it did. I now feel much better about going into college and having to conduct research and write papers for classes, where this was one of my biggest worries coming into college.*”

Students learn through reflection, and it is a skill they take with them.

Credits

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