Reflection Resources for Experiential Educators

Created by MIT's Office of Experiential Learning & PKG Public Service Center

Why Reflection Matters

Reflection allows students to make sense of their experiences by creating transferable links between knowledge and practice - moving students from description and explanation to evaluation and critique. In the context of experiential learning, reflection offers a chance for students to link what they are learning in their studies to an experience out in the world, whether in a corporate workplace, in a campus research lab, or in a local or global community setting.

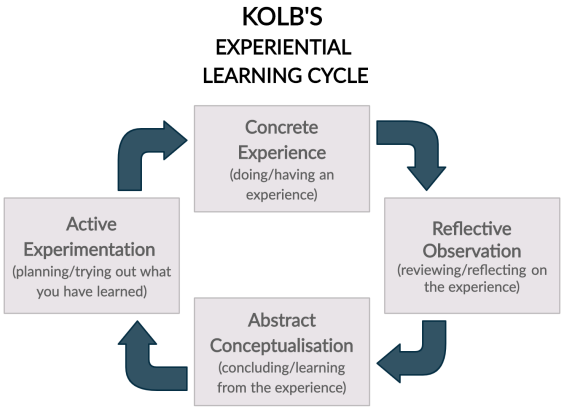
Reflection, done well, can generate, deepen, and document student learning.

Reflective activities can also provide an opportunity for students to connect more deeply with and learn from one another. Time and space for facilitated reflection during a cohort-based experience help cultivate a sense of community and belonging for students.

Incorporating Reflection into Experiential Learning Opportunities (ELOs)

There are many different techniques and approaches to reflection, and because students process learning differently, it's important to vary the kinds of strategies you adopt in your programs or courses. Some students will benefit from groups being split into pairs for more intimate discussion, while others might prefer solo journaling before coming together for conversation or illustrating their thoughts and ideas in drawings.

Students may not always understand the value of reflection and may express skepticism or feel that it's a "waste of time" compared to hands-on activities or technical instruction. **It's important to explain the purpose and value of reflection to students and why it's integral to their learning.**



One simplified model of how learning occurs in experiential learning settings is Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle[1] (see diagram below). Kolb describes how learners create and refine their understanding through an iterative spiral of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and acting. While this guide primarily addresses reflection, many of the activities described below can also support conceptualization.

[1] Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson.

Types of Reflection

[adapted from the University of Puget Sound's Faculty Resources (link no longer available)]

Small Group Dialogue

Small group discussions allow students to understand their experiences from a new perspective by integrating their peers' experiences into their own. Initial questions solicit descriptions from individual students, allowing group members to place their own experiences in the context of wider possibilities. Subsequent interpretive questions ask students to share what they learned and what they think it means in the context of the course learning goals. Facilitators can react to individual student's needs, creating a safe and supportive reflective environment. Pairing one or two students together to discuss a particular topic, before returning to the larger group, works well in quiet groups that seem uncomfortable with initially sharing individual thoughts with the whole group.

> For example, the Social Identity Wheel guides students to identify socially and reflect on the various ways those identities become visible or more keenly felt at different times, and how those identities impact the ways others perceive or treat them.

Directed Writing

Ask students to respond to prepared questions designed to address the ELO goals. These activities provide program staff or faculty with more control and clear assessment opportunities. Writing can be assigned to target specific stages of the ELO to emphasize the student's development. If done throughout the ELO process, directed writing exercises can provide students with evidence of their evolving perspectives and personal growth. This video and these sample reflection questions are a good place to start getting ideas. Boise State has a list of Experiential Learning Reflection Questions broken into 2-3-week periods within a semester-long experience.

> A Pre-flection Directed Writing Exercise allows students to take a snapshot of where they are before the experience commences. It helps ELO program staff understand students' expectations, levels of knowledge, and goals for the program. Prompt students with specific questions about the personal/ professional/ academic enrichment goals they were hoping to get out of an in-person EL opportunity, and how they might work with you and other partners to replicate some of them virtually. (UROP applications may include some of this content already with no additional work.)

Journaling

Journaling allows students to document changes in their attitudes, skills, and understanding as learning happens. The best journal assignments nurture the student's learning with prompts that are used repeatedly throughout the ELO. Unlike directed writing assignments that address specific ELO learning objectives, journal entries are less structured and allow students to process as they write. Journaling is also meant to be a repetitive activity throughout an ELO, whereas a directed writing assignment might only happen once. Journals provide instructors and staff with real-time evaluative resources on student learning, helping you assess student progress toward learning outcomes.

> Have students keep a journal where they can record weekly entries. Referencing Kolb or Gibbs' Experiential Learning models, provide students with a structure to use. Students should begin with objective descriptions of experiences, answering questions like, "What happened?" Then, students should try to understand the behaviors described using concepts or theories they've learned. The bulk of the entry should then be dedicated to interpretation, answering questions like: *What knowledge or skills did you acquire today? What does it mean to you, your growth, and/or goals? What did you learn about others?* Students can keep virtual notebooks, giving program staff permission to view them. Consider giving students flexibility on the format of their journals, using tools like voice memos or blogs if those media feel more natural or meaningful.

Reflection Maps

Reflection maps emphasize the connections made by students between theory and practice. The associative nature of reflection mapping encourages students to approach their memory of the ELO activity more creatively, yielding unexpected feelings or interpretations. Reflection maps are usually visual devices and can range from simple Venn diagrams and mind maps to elaborate interactive multimedia maps using tools like Miro or Explain Everything.

A Reflection Map is a visual and non-linear way for students to reflect on a process and their development. Pose a question or offer a topic for exploration and allow students to illustrate the progression of their thoughts. Normally, the main subject is located in the center of the map. From there, related ideas and keywords branch out in all directions. Here's one example of what a Reflection Map might look like. You might consider asking students to map the personal challenges they encounter while working on a research project, the realizations they made while working with an international NGO, or their process for developing a new idea or startup.

E-Portfolios

E-portfolios provide an ongoing personal learning space where students can collect and layer descriptive and reflective documents over a single or a series of ELO activities. As a collection device, e-portfolios can encompass multiple reflection techniques and media types by including directed writings, blogs, feedback, and visualization of the student's learning.

An e-portfolio is a personal website that communicates student skills, experiences, and learning. It showcases various artifacts, documents, and media. E-Portfolios are a place to contextualize those artifacts with reflective writing for potential employers or graduate schools. Check out these resources and examples from Auburn University.

Presentations

By sharing their understanding of the ELO experience with others in a presentation, students learn to articulate their learning in a way that a general audience can understand. Based on their testimonials, students are excited to share their experiences and are often surprised that they learn more just from talking about a topic. Presentations are great ways for students to demonstrate and document their learning at the conclusion of an ELO.

A Final Reflection Presentation helps students connect their learning back to the ELO's objectives. Allow students to get creative by making pre-recorded video presentations, PowerPoint slides, or multimedia displays to share their growth. A final presentation can be prompted with questions like: *How does this experience play into your academic trajectory? How does it influence you personally? What is next for you, and what do you want to carry forward from this experience?*

Activities

Active critical reflection gets students out of their chairs and out of their "heads," often yielding unexpected interpretations of their learning experience. These reflections take students outside their traditional learning comfort zones, engaging each student's creativity and encouraging the student to consider their learning from a new direction. Reflection activities can include games, props, or outside learning materials. Doing these remotely takes some extra creativity.

Make, Show, and Tell is the grown-up version of the activity some students might have done in elementary school. Tell students to use props they can find in their homes and neighborhoods to build an object or sculpture that reminds them of how they feel about their ELO experience. Ask them to bring their item(s) to the reflection session, and have them explain their items to their peers or supervisors.

Overcoming Challenges to Reflection

When facilitating reflective practices, particularly in remote/virtual environments, don't operate on default assumptions of what students are experiencing. Ask them about their situation, particularly about the challenges they're facing and the resources they might need. Some students may find themselves with caregiving, financial, or other responsibilities. Some might be struggling with mental health challenges. Some may find themselves without comfortable and connected working spaces. These may take priority over more abstract learning outcomes, and that's okay.

Remember that reflection can be tiring and can feel risky to students. Set ground rules and boundaries beforehand to establish the conditions for trust and prepare students for the mental energy required. These ground rules can be about confidentiality, respect, using "I" statements, and ways to involve everyone and ensure full participation. Respect for each other is key - this is a space to give each other the benefit of the doubt in a learning environment, to learn, and to have real conversations.

Reflection can often lead to difficult and/or controversial conversations. That's not a bad thing. Students may disagree passionately, and that can be a learning opportunity for everyone. If a session goes poorly, that's okay. Know that you can always take a break in reflection sessions and return with a different approach when tension is lower.

Reflection Facilitation Tips

- ☐ DO encourage participation.
- ☐ DO use open-ended questions and ask for specific examples.
- ☐ DO appreciate contributions.
- ☐ DO keep the discussion relevant and on time.

- ☐ DON'T force people to speak or put them on the spot.
- ☐ DON'T offer solutions or act like an expert.
- ☐ DON'T interpret what you think someone means - clarify with them instead.

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Have questions or want help figuring out how to implement reflection in your experiential learning program? Contact OEL at oel@mit.edu.