
4 How to promote reflective practice

Coverage

- The reflective practitioner and the reflexive student
- Learning diary/log (professional development journal)
- Log structure suggestions: what, why, reaction, issues, learned, goal setting
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Introduction

Becoming a reflexive student is akin to becoming a reflective practitioner in any field, and one model that we use to promote reflective practice in our students in learning development is arguably akin to Kolb's 'active learning model' (Kolb, 1984), which is used in many professional development programmes. The model as applied to our practice could be described thus:

- Concepts are offered (here learning/study theory).
- Concepts are tested in new situations (here, putting theory into practice as a student).
- Observations are made and reflected upon (prompted by discussion, note-making and learning log entries (below)).
- Concepts and generalisations are evolved and adapted and are again –
- Tested in new situations, etc.

That is, students are offered concepts and models of good practice with respect to study and academic skills. The students are then given a space in which to rehearse the models of good practice; this rehearsal is followed by structured reflection where students are encouraged to consider their experiences so that they can further understand, adapt and use effective study and academic skills, techniques and practices – self-consciously and appropriately. While sometimes accused of being mechanistic (Holmes, 2001, 2002), in practice this is not only a thoughtful, mature and respectful way of introducing students to the good practice that will facilitate their success as students, it is also a model of behaviour and reflection that will facilitate the development of the emergent graduate persona within other disciplines and subject areas. (See Chapter 15 on how to promote overall success for models of how this translates into teaching and learning practice.)

This reflective practice can be linked to reflective learning practices that we have also covered elsewhere in this text, where active learning is promoted through the use of considered organisation and time management strategies, creative note-making techniques, targeted research and active reading practice, study partners and groups, discussion and rehearsal, formative exercises, including formative writing opportunities, and the use of the revision cycle¹ in active learning. That is, we argue that students need to engage in ongoing (revision) activities in order to promote understanding, to make learning conscious, to move from surface to deep learning and to transfer information from the short- to the long-term memory and into practice. The implicit argument here is that without reflection there is no learning. In learning development, while we encourage such good practice throughout all our work with students, we also focus on the learning diary or log – also known as the professional development journal – as a means of overtly developing the student as a reflective, reflexive practitioner. We shall detail our practice with respect to the learning log below, moving on to briefly discuss recent developments with respect to the Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) which is gradually being introduced into many universities as the official vehicle for these sorts of processes.

Learning development and the learning log

As learning development practitioners we build student learning diaries or learning logs into our own module: ‘An introduction to academic studies’ (which we cover in more detail in Chapter 15 on how to promote overall success), but the learning log can be introduced as a reflective

learning tool in any programme of study. Put simply the learning log is where the students engage in focused, concise and analytical reviews of their own practices, processes and learning – for a specific learning or study activity and/or across a whole programme of study.

Tutor activity: Thinking about logs

- 1 Have you utilised learning logs or similar in your practice already?
- 2 What do you like about learning logs?
- 3 What do you dislike about logs?
- 4 How did you introduce the logs to your students?
- 5 What do you want from this section of this book?

Here are some responses from other tutors:

Have you utilised learning logs or similar in your practice already?

- Yes – we introduced them last year. It was my first experience of this device.

What do you like about learning logs?

- I like the fact that they are designed to encourage self-conscious learning.

What do you dislike about logs?

- I hate it where the student writes pages and pages of description but seems to have no idea of what the log itself is for – or what specific formative activities were for.

How did you introduce the logs to your students?

- I suppose that I did not introduce the topic very well. I think I was caught between two poles – not wanting to stifle a creative and interesting response to the task but, at the same time, not wanting students to be descriptive, definitely wanting concise and analytical journals.

What do you want from this section of this book?

- I would like some tips as to how to help my students write better logs. I want them to understand the purpose of the log itself, and I want them to demonstrate real understanding as to the form, content and purpose of the course as a whole.
- I want to help students write reflective journals alongside their group work activities.

Query: Were any of these responses like your own? Do you now have goals for this section of the book?

● **Tip:** We have found that being told exactly what you would like in a learning log or journal does not in fact limit students. Typically the less inducted student is empowered to give you what you want more swiftly while the stronger student is prompted to exceed your expectations.

Model it first

If thinking about using learning logs with your students it is useful if you think first of what you want the log to achieve for the student, and then of how you will be assessing that these learning goals have been met. Draw up a model log for yourself first, and then gently lead students towards making the sorts of entries that you feel would benefit them as active learners of your subject. (For a model log entry please see Resource 14.1.)

● **Tip:** You can photocopy this resource as a model for your students if you feel that it embodies the qualities that you wish to encourage in them. Typically we find that models are under-used in academic endeavour – perhaps for the reasons mentioned by the tutor in the ‘box’: not wanting to stifle creativity. Perhaps we fear that students will only copy the content of what we offer rather than drawing inspiration from the form. Whatever the reasons, we find that students are desperate for models while tutors tend to be loathe to offer them. However, because the learning log is often as original a format for the tutor as it is for the student, we do find that we have leverage – if the tutor would benefit from a model of a good log surely the student could benefit also?

A model of good behaviour

In our programme, we expect students to write a learning log after every taught session, and we introduce this in the very first session that we have with our students. We might relate the activity to the Personal Development Portfolio or similar if appropriate. While learning logs will be assessed in our programme, we emphasise that they are designed to encourage active learning – to move students from surface to deep learning. Basically we emphasise that the idea of the log is to help students become more successful students in the first instance (and thus to assist with the evolution and development of a successful graduate identity (Holmes, 2002)) and that the practice, if continued, will enable students to become ever more thoughtful, reflexive practitioners.

How we do it

The learning log or diary is an essential part of our own study and academic skills programme. It is something that we introduce in the very first session of such a programme and that we insist that students maintain session by session. We collect and mark – not grade – logs each session, so that students receive feedback on their log generation and we also receive feedback on how well the programme is progressing.

Rather than having a formal ‘what, why and how’ lecture or discussion around the learning log (as we have provided in other sections of this text for other academic forms), students learn to write logs by doing them and by constantly receiving formative feedback upon them (a possible model for other writing?). In this way we feel that we do not problematise an academic form that has not yet acquired the negative accretions associated with the essay, exam or presentation. However, the more such logs are introduced as vehicles of assessment without adequate explanation and formative feedback, the more this will become another such mysterious and problematic academic form or practice.

Typically we stress that the role of the log is to rehearse students in good active learning practice. That is, students will be taken through a series of reflections designed to make their learning conscious in analytical ways and this will improve both the quantity and the quality of their learning. At the same time, for us, learning logs become an excellent tool for our own course monitoring, telling us where topics have been covered adequately or inadequately, where material has been fully understood and where it will need further elaboration.

We have a particular structure that we recommend that students use when starting their learning logs (see Resource 14.2), with students compiling entries under the headings:

- What
- Why
- Reaction
- Learned
- Issues
- Goals.

And we lead students through the completion of their first log in class, perhaps handing out the sample log (see Resource 14.1), to prompt the production of the sort of entries that we want to see. We stress that we want concise and targeted reflections rather than descriptive accounts of their activities.

Assessing logs

In our own study and academic skills module, student logs are a part of the formal assessment and students have to submit a completed log for each session of the programme (whether or not they attended that session). In other modules, tutors might request a specific number of logs – the best six, say. In still other modules a whole workbook might be provided for students in which reflections (such as learning logs) and other activities have to be recorded. The whole workbook will be submitted at the end of the programme and will be awarded a certain proportion of the overall marks for the module.

● **Tip:** If using this latter device do make clear to students just where marks are awarded across the workbook as a whole.

Even where each log completed has to be submitted for evaluation in a final assessment portfolio, we allow students to revise their logs following formative feedback from the tutor. In this way we feel that we can emphasise the developmental rather than the assessment function of the log. If you have a group of a sufficiently small size, logs can be collected in frequently, even every week. Where we are able to do this, we mark but do not grade these formative logs – still reminding the students that the logs as a whole will receive a grade in the final portfolio. Formative marking is designed to prompt the production of concise but effective logs so that students are encouraged to produce very brief *descriptions* but more thoughtful analysis of the content and purpose of those learning or study events.

Thus students are encouraged to put down concise yet detailed write-ups of the learning that took place, with analysis prompted in the ‘why’ section of the log. In the ‘why’ section of the review, the student should be encouraged to demonstrate understanding not only of the content per se, but of how it relates to the course structure, the underlying principles and connections. For example, you might want the student to understand why there was a lecture on the eukaryotic cell or postmodernism in your programme. Here you might like them to be able to relate a specific lecture or seminar topic to your course aims and outcomes, for example, and how it relates to the assignment set. (See also the Cornell note-making system discussed on p. 103.)

When seeking ‘reactions’ from our students, we stress that they should be as honest as possible when noting their personal reaction or response to an activity. There is no necessarily right or wrong ‘reaction’ to a learning event, only the one that the real student has encountered. Obviously this requires that the student not be penalised for ‘inappropriate’ reactions – or for encountering problems rather than just sailing untroubled through a course.

● **Tutor tip:** You have to be honest with yourself here and if you feel you will tend to judge more harshly the student who is bored or who could not find the key text area first go, it might be necessary to omit this part of the learning log.²

Note: Some students will instantly enjoy the learning log. Others may really resent this practice – especially if they feel that you are peering inside their minds in ways that get them to reveal their innermost fears and failings. We have heard students say that they feel ‘betrayed’ by the log or that they resent and distrust this revelatory process. Hence this is an area requiring real sensitivity and empathy from the tutor.

Introducing the learning log

In the session where you are going to introduce the learning log you might like to flag this up in the session agenda that you write on the board. Tell students that you are going to take them through their first learning log at the end of the session and that it will be based upon the activities engaged with in that session.

When it comes to taking students through that first log, we suggest that you write the categories that you would like students to include in their logs on the board. We recommend what, why, reaction, issues, learned, goal setting – but do choose your own. For example, some tutors would include a ‘starting point’ section where students can note their understanding of a particular topic prior to engaging with the lecture or seminar; similarly a section requiring a brainstorm could open every log. Whatever categories you decide to utilise we recommend that you briefly explain the purpose of each of category – possibly as we have in the student handout in Resource 14.2.

● **Tips:**

- Complete the first learning log by getting class members to call out responses to the various headings.
- Get students to complete the first log in pairs.
- Collect the first logs the very next time you see the students. Mark and return as soon as possible.
- Hand out the model log after you have collected in the students’ first log and before you get them to complete a second log.

Personal development portfolios

PDPs are being encouraged in universities by the Southern England Education Consortium as a way of developing employability skills in students. As such they may be related to Key Skills if a university has opted to make explicit Key Skill development at Level 4. Similarly they

may be linked to study and academic skill development or they may be located within that aspect of the curriculum that explicitly focuses on employability, graduate attributes or personal professional development. As a developing activity it can be seen that this is an area that is still ripe for further definition and exploration.

Critics of such developments argue that again this is a negative response to mass higher education (see also the discussion of widening participation and the skills debate in Chapter 1 and a related discussion in Chapter 6 on how to promote self-confidence) and actually confirms the negative impressions of widening participation students. That is, while some students acquire degrees that do lead to employment, other, typically non-traditional, students have to demonstrate value addition, that is skills development beyond that bestowed by the acquisition of the university degree. Moreover, it has been argued that if employability skills are to be truly relevant they could only be measured by employment outcomes. Thus it is not enough to focus on developing these skills or attributes in students, there is a need to demonstrate that such developments, **in your institution**, do lead to your students acquiring jobs, albeit that students from a particular institution would not get a job if in competition with students from a higher status institution, no matter what additional skills portfolio they had compiled.

What now?

Whatever the political ramifications of this debate, if your institution is currently moving towards PDPs, then you would be advised to investigate the system that is being introduced at your university and which departments or units will have some or overall responsibility for this enterprise. Further, you might like to investigate how you and your particular courses or modules are supposed to articulate with the central thrust of the PDP project. For example, in our institution there is to be a three-pronged development of employability and related skills. In the first year there will be a focus on HE orientation ensuring that students do become inducted into academic practices per se and in the specific practices of their subject (or subjects if on joint degrees). In the second year there will be a focus on employability with the encouragement of work placement or work-related modules and in the third year the emphasis will be on the development of dissertation or project skills. The PDP process will be expected to articulate with all these developments.

The PDP enterprise will be clearer for students if:

- University promotional material refers explicitly to PDP;
- The rationale for PDP is made explicit – at every stage of a degree programme;

- PDP opportunities within courses are made explicit.

Who is responsible?

Alongside the three-tiered shape to our institution's Undergraduate Modular Scheme and its articulation with PDP opportunities, the careers service has a particular expertise with respect to PDP in terms of supporting students with their career prospects. Initially subject staff are being invited to develop PDP initiatives within their modules – and they can coordinate with the careers service if they so wish. The positives of such an approach allow for the initiatives to move forward via staff that are enthusiastic and motivated towards the project. It also allows for a variety of approaches to evolve which can subsequently be evaluated to generate models of good practice. Critics might dispute this perhaps by arguing that when everyone is responsible for something, then no one really takes responsibility and energy is dissipated and opportunities are lost.

How we do it

Learning development and careers personnel discuss HE orientation development and PDP initiatives. Particular schemes are identified as loci for proactive engagement. Initiatives are set in motion and good practice will be identified by end-of-course feedback from students and staff.

Where HE orientation opportunities are set up, students can be introduced to the way that these will articulate with PDP development. Within the context of reflexive, reflective practice, students can be alerted as to how the learning log relates to the PDP and both can be linked to the curriculum vitae – that aspect of the PDP which is typically developed in either second- or third-year professional development modules.

Overall conclusion

In this chapter we have considered how we in learning development facilitate the evolution of the student as a reflective, reflexive practitioner. We have focused particularly on our use of the learning log or diary, sometimes termed a professional development journal. We stress that at this time the log per se is not experienced as a problematic agent of assessment, thus it is perhaps uniquely poised to be introduced in positive ways and developed through scaffolded and sensitive formative experiences: that students learn to write logs by doing rather than failing them. We detailed how we in learning development introduce, use and

scaffold the learning logs that we utilise, even though they are also vehicles of assessment. We moved on to briefly consider the Personal Development Portfolio as the process that will probably become the one that most universities adopt with regard to developing students as effective practitioners. We hope that you have found this section of the book useful – not only in terms of the learning log in itself, but in that it also offers a model of how we could introduce students to other academic assessment vehicles, for students can learn how to write essays and how to deliver presentations in just such scaffolded and formative ways.

Resources

- 14.1 Example of a student learning log (on a research and reading session)
- 14.2 The reflective learning log – or professional development journal

Notes

- 1 The revision cycle: revise learning after ten minutes, a day, a week, a month and six months.
- 2 Certain programmes – as with education and QTS or with social work – require the production of reflective journals of some form that will be subject to legal as well as evaluative scrutiny. Ethically here tutors should warn students with regard to making statements that would be in contravention to government laws or institutional codes of practice: complete honesty may not be at all appropriate.

Bibliography and further reading

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