Making Meaning of Engagement Experiences through Reflection

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Introduction

In higher education, we strive to emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). Reflection is utilized as a tool in a variety of ways to help education professionals provide opportunities for students to make meaning of their engagement experiences. Often we ask, how do we integrate reflection into an engagement experience? Additionally, which type of reflection should we use? This eBook will highlight theories of reflection and strategies to help you select and implement the right kind of reflection for your program.

What is engagement?
Engagement is the quality of effort a student puts into “educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes” (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991 from Hu & Kuh, 2002, 555). Engagement is a mutual relationship between the student and the institution. A student must be engaged, but the institution must be engaged back by creating inclusive and affirming environments, student-faculty contact, active and collaborative learning opportunities, and clear expectations (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

We use this definition of engagement throughout our eBook series on engagement to maintain a consistent operational definition.

Check out our other eBooks on engagement!

What is reflection?
Reflection is the intentional process of making meaning of an experience.

Why do we reflect?
Reflecting helps people make meaning of experiences. This meaning making can result in learning lessons in order to actively shape future behavior in similar situations.

Make sure to check out tips and best practices.
Making Meaning

Every year, many developmental opportunities are offered to the students on your campus, and it is important to help them make meaning of those experiences. But how do you help them develop their own meaning-making thought process? As the individual charged with this responsibility, it can be helpful to learn more about the many styles of reflection and the multitude of approaches that can be tailored to meet the needs of your programs.

Questions to consider:

• What model(s) exist?
• What is reflection?
• Why do we reflect?

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model *(Kolb, 1984)*

This model helps practitioners understand how students can make meaning of their experiences through different stages. While the model has four stages, it is most important to understand that the act of reflective observation is the main focus. This stage of the model is the point at which you are able to influence how your students make meaning of their experiences. How do you help them develop the skills to be a reflective observer of their own life and the world around them?
Kolb’s Model in Action

Consider that you are designing a program for sophomores to learn more about being career ready. Utilizing this learning model, you might take the following approach:

**Concrete Experience**
A video showcasing a job interview is shown to the students.

**Reflective Observation**
Throughout the video, you ask the students to make notes about the feelings and emotions that they experience while watching the video.

**Abstract Conceptualization**
Students are asked to conceptualize how well they would perform in a similar situation and consider what skills they would need to develop in preparation for interview experiences like in the video.

**Active Experimentation**
Students are assigned a professional staff member for a mock-interview experience where they are asked to apply what they have learned.

This model showcases the importance of providing students with a concrete experience, an opportunity to reflect, time to consider how they would approach the same situation in the future given what they now know, and lastly an environment for them to test out their new knowledge.

**TIP**
For reflection to be effective, it is important to build trust-based relationships between peers and between the peers and educator.
Thinking Beyond Kolb’s Model

These models also provide frameworks for reflection.

**A, B, C Model of Reflection** *(Welch, 1999)*

This “Affect-Behavior-Cognition” model approach to reflection provides an easy way to remember and think about the act of reflection.

### Dimensions of Reflection *(Welch, 1999)*

- **Affect - Feelings**
  - *This is how I felt*
  - *This is how I feel now*

- **Behavior - Actions**
  - *This is what I did*
  - *This is what I will do now*

- **Cognition - Thinking**
  - *This is what I thought*
  - *This is what I think now*

### Example:

Utilizing the “Think-Pair-Share” approach to reflection you can have students that are attending your living learning community dinner and discussion program take time at the end to use the A, B, C model of reflection.

**A**

How did you feel at the beginning of the program? How did you feel during the program? How do you feel now as you reflect on what you experienced?

**B**

What did you do during the program? How did you participate? What will you do next with what you have learned?

**C**

What did you think before the discussion? What did you think during the discussion? What do you think now as a result of the discussion?

### TIP

- Developing an environment that allows students to experience what it means to be vulnerable and authentic is important. This can often be a hard paradigm shift for them as young adults, but it can serve as a catalyst for creating a self-reflective practice *(Brown, 2010)*.

- Revisit reflection often; it is an ongoing process. Find ways to have students re-evaluate previous reflections and have them revisit their learning after they have had a chance to apply it.
**Borton’s Model of Reflection** *(Borton, 1970)*

While incorporating all the central skills of reflection, this model focuses the reflection on action. Some common applications utilizing this model are with students who are new to the structured reflection process or if the reflective process has limited time.

**Example:**

During your week-long orientation leader training, you have built in reflection opportunities for your student leaders to step back and try to gain a deeper understanding of what they are learning. At the end of your session on customer service, you have allowed for time to use Borton’s model to guide your students through the reflective discussion process. You pose each question allowing time for small groups to discuss their answers and compile their collective thoughts for large group sharing.

**What?**

What happened during the session?
What did I do during it?
What was my reaction of the information that was shared?

**So what?**

What did I feel during the session?
What are my feelings now?

**Now what?**

What have I learned as a result of the session?
What will I do differently in the future?

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**TIP**

Make sure you choose appropriate types of reflection to match the process that is expected to take place, but be able to change the reflection on the fly to match what happened during the experience.

**TIP**

Provide a variety of reflection options, giving students more than one way to choose to reflect. Introverts may want to journal or reflect independently but extroverts may want to dialogue.
Gibbs' Framework for reflection (Gibb’s 1988)

Gibbs’ framework provides a more stage-focused approach for reflection through a detailed exploration of the experience.

Example:

During your 10-week first year seminar course, you have decided to utilize the journaling process by introducing Gibb’s framework one stage at a time with each stage building upon the previous stage. The first six weeks will gradually introduce your students to each stage in the framework and help them learn this process of reflection.

Week 1

Describe what it was like to acclimate yourself to campus.

Week 2

Describe a situation in which you had to speak in front of others during class.

What feelings, thoughts, or emotions were present during that experience? What are your feelings, thoughts, or emotions now?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Describe a situation in which you and a friend engaged in conflict.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What feelings, thoughts, or emotions were present during that experience? What are your feelings, thoughts, or emotions now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write out a list of the positives and negatives from this experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Describe a situation in which you had to hold a teammate accountable.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What feelings, thoughts, or emotions were present during that experience? What are your feelings, thoughts, or emotions now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write out a list of the positives and negatives from this experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking about the experience, write a brief outline separating out each component of the experience. Using the outline that you have created, assess each component.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Describe a situation in which you were disappointed in yourself.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What feelings, thoughts, or emotions were present during that experience? What are your feelings, thoughts, or emotions now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write out a list of the positives and negatives from this experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking about the experience, write a brief outline separating out each component of the experience. Using the outline that you have created, assess each component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Think about the answers you have articulated for the previous questions in this journal entry. What have you learned from this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Describe a situation in which something you learned in this course helped you outside of class.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What feelings, thoughts, or emotions were present during that experience? What are your feelings, thoughts, or emotions now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write out a list of the positives and negatives from this experience.</td>
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<td>Thinking about the experience, write a brief outline separating out each component of the experience. Using the outline that you have created, assess each component.</td>
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<td>Think about the answers you have articulated for the previous questions in this journal entry. What have you learned from this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moving forward how might you approach a similar experience in a different way?</td>
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Reflection Pedagogies

Below are reflection pedagogies that can be utilized to help students engage in the process of reflection.

**Plus/Delta Approach**

This approach allows for students to think about what was going well for them and what will they might change next time when they do this again.

**Example:**

Students involved in a recent event that took place on your campus are meeting to debrief the event. You pose two questions for them to answers anonymously on paper, collected, and then shared with the rest of the group. Allowing your students to share their reflections anonymously can encourage a more authentic reflective environment.

*What went well during the event preparation and execution process?*

*What might you change for the future if you had to run this event or a similar event?*

**Critical Incidents Approach**

This approach is less about the actual experience and more about them reflecting on something that is much deeper and spans a longer time period, more than just on individual experience. This approach can help students learn more about their self-development process, as well as their identity development. Providing time for students to think critically about their learning moments, pearls of wisdom, will allow them to continue their self reflective journey and to keep polishing that diamond. The more we allow our students to experience critical self-reflection, the more they will continue to shine.

**Example:**

As the advisor to a student group, you choose to utilize this approach with your executive board. You ask them to think back over the semester and identify a variety of learning moments. After identifying those moments, you ask them to think about how they have impacted their understanding of self.

**Highlights and Lowlights Approach**

This approach allows for a quick check in reflection.

**Example:**

As the supervisor to students working in your office you choose to utilize this approach after your students first week of work. You ask them to think about the past week and answer these three questions. What worked well? What was tricky or difficult? What would they do differently next time?

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**BEST PRACTICES**

The Gold Program at Suny Geneseo utilizes journaling as a foundational component of the program. All workshops in the program require a reflection for students to receive credit towards program completion. Detailed reflection questions, instructions on how to reflect after a workshop and a sample reflection are provided in an effort to guide and direct students in their reflective practices.

[Click to read more...](#)
## Tools for Reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journals</th>
<th>Blogging</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>Poetry</th>
<th>Video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the tool?</strong></td>
<td>The act of reflecting through either writing or typing ones thoughts, feelings, and emotions in a designated space.</td>
<td>Web based form of reflection for recording images, thoughts, feelings, and emotions in a designated space that allows an easy view of all posts from beginning to end.</td>
<td>Creative reflection through static visual representation of thoughts, feelings, and emotions.</td>
<td>Rhythmic reflection through sound and symbolism to evoke meaning of thoughts, feelings, and emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why is it used?</strong></td>
<td>Used to help provide a specific location for the reflective process to be recorded.</td>
<td>Used to publicly or privately allow others to share reflections on the web.</td>
<td>Used to provide a very creative and open space for reflection.</td>
<td>Used to allow for a different medium with which to share reflection with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the best method for use?</strong></td>
<td>Best used with experiences that are continuous and happen over the course of a semester or longer.</td>
<td>Best used with either group or individual focused reflection processes. When used with groups, it allows for multiple members of the team to reflect in a single space and allows for open or selective sharing of their reflection.</td>
<td>Best used for group sharing of the reflection process and when adequate time allows for the creative reflection process to take place.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do you evaluate the reflection tool?</strong></td>
<td>Journals that utilize structured prompts can be evaluated through review of like ideas or concepts that appear in the recorded text.</td>
<td>Blogs that utilize structured prompts can be evaluated through review of like ideas or concepts that appear in the recorded text.</td>
<td>A record of the major themes found in the artwork can be derived from the sharing process. It is important to record the shared reflections for analysis.</td>
<td>A record of the major themes found in the poetry can be derived from the sharing process. It is important to record the shared reflections for analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### BEST PRACTICES

The Center for Student Leadership Development at The University of Rhode Island utilizes this model in a unique way. Students in the Minor for Leadership Studies program are asked in each of their courses to provide abstract conceptualization for knowledge of a specific theory, model, or topic, their understanding, and a critical application of how this knowledge exists in their own life. Over the course of their participation in the program students are asked to revisit previous reflections and re-evaluate their knowledge based on what they now know. For many students these re-evaluations come a year or more after their initial thoughts.

[Click to read more...]
Conclusion

Reflection is the intentional process of learning from an experience. It helps students make meaning of their experience, learn life lessons, and it impacts their future behavior. Integrating intentional reflection opportunities into your engagement experiences can help begin, advance, or sustain your students’ self-reflective developmental process.

Things to Remember

When designing the reflective process, it is important to always consider the following to avoid common issues.

• Give enough time
• Provide enough guidance
• Pay attention to the pedagogy that you are using
• Help students move through stages in a timely manner, sometimes we get caught in stages because we are our own biggest critics.
• Embed reflection processes as a requirement for students to complete your program(s).

References


Learn Forward Engagement Series

Throughout the 2014 academic year, we have provided webinars focused on research and practical application, ebooks on strategies and best practices, and interactive blog posts on engaging higher education to give you knowledge and tools to enhance the valuable work you do. Below are the topics that will be covered:

**September | Engagement and Student Success**
- Strategies for Engaging First Year Students
- Events and Calendars as Engagement Tools
- Fostering Student Success Through Meaningful Engagement Opportunities
- Bridging the Gap: Integrating OrgSync to Enhance Student Engagement

**October | Engagement as an Intentional Process**
- Not Just Another Campus Program: Intentional Student Engagement
- Reaching the Other 80%: Helping All Students Find Their Fit
- Give ‘em the Goods! Making OrgSync Worthwhile
- Using Attendance Tracking to Support Engagement Initiatives

**November | Engagement and Employability**
- Engaging Students through Professional Exploration, Preparation, and Experience
- Minding the Gap: Increasing the Employability of International Students
- Engagement to Employability: Helping Students Build the Skills Employers Crave
- Showcasing Engagement with the ePortfolio

**January | Creating Meaningful Online Engagement Opportunities**
- Updating Your Community’s Relationship Status
- Intentional Online Interactions - The Importance of Purposeful Engagement with the Virtual Student
- Your Digital H.U.B.
- Engagement on the Go: Engagement Using Mobile Devices

**February | Engagement as Service Learning**
- Building the Foundation for Civic Engagement
- Digital Tools for Academic Service-Learning
- Creating a Campus Culture of Service: Linking Campus to Community
- Five Essential Vertebrae of Your Community Engagement Backbone
- Using the Service Management System to Expand Experiential Learning on Campus

**March | Making Meaning of Engagement Experiences through Reflection**
- The Art of Reflection: When, Why, and How to Use It Effectively with Student Engagement
- In Their Own Words: Reflection as a Powerful Pedagogy
- Creating Meaningful Co-Curricular Transcripts for Students

**April | Assessing Student Engagement**
- Assessing Student Learning Outside the Classroom
- Evaluating Leadership Development with the Student Leadership Competencies
- Coming Full Circle with Feedback as an Assessment Measure
- Making Data Make Sense: Strategies for Creating Powerful End of Year Reports

For more information about the Learn Forward Engagement Series visit:
www.orgsync.com/learnforward

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**Schedule a Demo**
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