

Becoming a Reflective Learner



Many of us have had experiences as **passive learners**. That is, we have been required to read textbooks and journal articles, listen to lectures and write exams dependent on rote memory. Your journey through this TRU Open Learning program will be of a different kind. You will be an active learner, a participant in a community, engaged in dialogue with your group facilitator and cohort members. Equally important, you will engage in a form of dialogue with yourself, as you become a reflective learner.

Reflection is a practice that facilitates the exploration, examination and understanding of what we are feeling, thinking and learning. It is a thoughtful consideration of academic material, personal experiences and interpersonal relationships. Reflection is a form of internal inquiry that extends the relevance of theory and deepens our understanding of the practice of our everyday life and work.

Through reflection we challenge our assumptions, ask new questions and try to make sense of our experiences. Instead of being passive receivers of external **expert** knowledge, we become active creators (and co-creators) of our own knowledge. As reflective learners we test our informal theories (those that we develop through our experiences as **practitioners** in the world) against formal theories (those that are developed by researchers and academics). We integrate theory and practice through a process of **reflection-on-action**, i.e. trying to make sense of experience after the fact and **reflection-in-action**, i.e. trying to make sense of experience while it is occurring (Schon, 1987).

Some learning theorists suggest that the concept of reflection-in-action alone misses the "social nature of practical knowledge" (Usher et. al, 1997). They contend that "reflection strategies are maximized when co-learners are encouraged to make [and articulate] connections between theory and practice" (Schell & Black, 1997, p. 23). Consistent with the view of the socially constructed nature of knowledge, we have designed a program in which you will be encouraged to share and explore your reflections with your fellow learners. You will be invited to interweave theory or formal knowledge with practical knowledge and to work with both your individual reflective techniques and group learning strategies.

References

Schell, J. W. & Black, R.S. (1997). Situated Learning: An Inductive Case Study of a Collaborative Learning Experience. *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, Vol. 24, No. 4.

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Usher, R., Bryant, I. & Johnston, R. (1997). *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge: Learning Beyond the Limits*. London: Routledge.

Different Forms of Reflective Learning

The practice of reflective learning can take many different forms. Here are some descriptions and examples:

For assigned readings, you will be asked to read book chapters or journal articles or visit web sites. You may then be asked to have an on-line dialogue with fellow learners to share your reactions to the material. Your dialogue may be guided or stimulated by questions from your facilitator as well as from each other. Such questions might include:

- What are your initial reactions to the readings?
- How do the readings fit with your own experiences?
- How have your ideas changed as a result of the readings?
- What new behaviours are you encouraged to try?

If you could have a conversation with the author, what would you say or ask?

You may also be asked to keep a reflective log or journal in which you will be asked to record and consider such issues concerning the readings as: how they have helped you to make sense of an experience; the questions they have triggered for you; whether you agreed or disagreed with the material; how you have reacted to it and whether your understanding of a personal or work-related situation changed after studying them. As well as being asked to comment on the contents of the study material, you also may be asked to comment on the **manner** in which it is presented.

During the process of your studies you may decide to use or be asked to experiment with new behaviours - such as being more assertive at work. Instead of just describing what you said or did, you also will be asked to record how you **felt** when you tried the new behaviour. You may be asked to describe the factors that influenced your behaviour, the impact these behavioural changes had on others or yourself, and if theory played any role in helping you to understand the experience.



Keeping a reflective journal

If you have not kept a reflective log, a diary, journal or sketchbook, you may have some questions about how to do it and why it can be useful to you. You may wonder about the purpose as well as what it should look like.

What is the purpose of keeping a reflective journal? —Keeping a journal will help you get in touch with your reactions to readings, behaviours,

experimentation, cohort dialogue, work experiences, and interpersonal relationships. It will help you "think about the way you think", encourage the integration of theory and practice, and serve as a record of your experiences and learning in the program.

What does a reflective journal look like? —A reflective journal is a personal expression of who you are so you will choose how it looks. Everyone has different qualities that make him or her unique. Therefore a journal can take many different forms. It can be an electronic journal, a sketchbook, a notebook, a binder, an audiotape or a combination of some or all of these forms. A "record" in it can include such things as written reflections, drawings, "doodles", pictures, poems, colours, clippings, quotes, descriptions of dreams, double entry journaling and mind-mapping or branching. The benefits of each of the different forms or styles may only become apparent as you try them. We encourage you to experiment with forms that you have not used before. You may find that through this process certain forms open up more ideas, feelings, energy and creativity for you. You should not feel constrained or limited to one style. You may find that what works for you is a combination of different styles, or you may find that you lean toward a particular style depending on your needs or feelings at the time. Journal keeping can be a lifelong process with many benefits. You may choose to continue to receive these benefits even after your courses are complete.

Examples of Different Types of Reflective Journals

Double-Entry Journaling

Sample, Double-Entry Journaling

<i>Objective Summary and Highlights</i>	<i>Subjective Reflections</i>
<p>Weisinger, Hendrie ((2000) <i>The Power of Positive Criticism</i>, New York: AMACOM</p> <p>Chapter: So you're afraid to criticize your boss? (pp. 99-107)</p>	<p>I am so glad to find this chapter. My boss is always saying she wants feedback, but how can I do this when she has the power??</p>
<p>This chapter emphasizes that a change in mindset is essential; it is important not to assume that there will be negative repercussions from giving criticism to your boss. Weisinger suggests 3 major ground rules: make sure your boss is receptive, make sure you are criticizing someone to whom you report directly and that your criticism relates to something your boss is doing that affects your work; and make sure you don't get into a power struggle with your boss.</p> <p>"The point is not to present yourself as a valid source of criticism but to present your criticism as important and valid information" (p. 102).</p>	<p>I must say that I found this chapter difficult to read at first because the three key ground rules were not clearly laid out. I had to read it over a couple of times in order to isolate these points. On the other hand, being forced to read it over really helped solidify the ideas!</p> <p>The three points make a lot of sense to me. I can see how criticizing my boss for taking long lunches would not be appropriate, no matter how much it irritates me, because it does not affect my ability to do my job. It's up to her boss to give this kind of feedback. But, I can give her feedback on the way she assigns me projects. She usually leaves them on my desk with a sticky note saying "urgent". What I need is the opportunity to have a discussion about the parameter of the project, its priority in light of my other work, and a chance to talk about what "urgent" means. I really liked this quote - it helps keep the whole discussion on a more objective level. That's good for me because I've been feeling defensive about this problem.</p> <p>I do have one concern - the use of the word criticism sounds somewhat negative to me. I wonder why the author didn't use the word "constructive feedback" instead. I think I'll ask the group online what they think of this.</p> <p>One of the things Weisinger suggests is to make sure you know what you're talking about. I could pull an example of the last project, explain the effect of the request on me, and describe the benefits of having a conversation about her requests. I liked the tips for specific phrases I could use to open up conversations. I can practice privately using these ideas, before I actually approach my boss. Maybe I could say something like, "Meg would you have some time to get together later this week, I'd like to go over the status of the advertising project." Once we're in the meeting, I could say "This project has pushed my other projects behind schedule - I'd like some feedback from you about priorities." Then I could talk about the benefits of this conversation and let her know I'd like to have it earlier the next time.</p> <p>I still feel a bit nervous, but I have some ideas to play with and I'm willing to give it a try. I'll report back in my next entry</p>
<p>"Instead of pointing out what your boss is not doing right..., explain to her that you are having a problem..." (p. 103).</p>	

Process - How do I do it? —Use a binder or notebook in which you can use each of the two facing pages for a specific purpose: the left hand page to take notes from the readings and the right hand page for your reflections. On the left include the source of the reading, quotations that stand out, a summary of key points, steps or procedures, models or frameworks. Use the right hand page for your reflections about the reading. You might include your responses to the material, how you are going to apply what you have read, any questions you have, something new you have learned. You can include points you agree with, ideas you disagree with, areas which were not clear, critiques of the clarity of the writing, or the ideas presented.

Be thoughtful in your comments - do more than say "I liked the chapter" or "The chapter didn't make sense for me." Reflect on how the information fits with your current knowledge or experience. Ask yourself questions such as "Did I learn something new?", "Do I agree or disagree with this author?", "What questions do I have for this author?", "What irritated me about this reading?", "What was helpful about this reading?" If you are keeping your journal on the computer, you could set up two columns to work with.

Benefits - Why should I try this? —This process will encourage active, reflective learning instead of passive memorizing of information (or skimming over material). It will allow you to engage with the reading as a form of dialogue, almost as though you were having a conversation with the author. The process will help you clarify your thoughts and reactions help you prepare for your online conversations. This does not mean that you have to have all the answers to your questions, puzzles or concerns before you go online. The double-entry process will help you extend your thinking about the reading so that the online discussion can take place at a deeper level than simply saying you liked or did not like the article. Most importantly, the process will help you link theory with practice. It will encourage you to consider the ways in which theory can inform your work, and the ways in which your practical experience might inform theory.

Stream of Consciousness Writing

Sample: Stream of Consciousness Writing

I wish I didn't have to do this today I can't think of a thing to write down and the sound of the traffic from the window keeps intruding but then the flowers from the window look beautiful I did do a good job with the roses this year must remember to put the manure on in the same way next time and I am looking forward to the taste of my first coffee-mmmm coffee warm and rich and I just have to keep writing here and writing here -well three pages can't take all that long can't see the sense in all of this but guess I'll just do it want to get through them to that coffee waiting there...the chair feels good and so does the the air this morning... Wish I hadn't had that conversation with Jim at work yesterday it worries me..why I wonder...his attitude bothered me and it made me react defensively..maybe I'm more upset by my reaction and by appearing foolish. I didn't want things to escalate what can I do ? What can I do ? I'll have to think on that hope I don't feel a total fool going in to work today. How can I word things to make the essence of what I was trying to say get across /come through rather than getting caught up in some silly emotional over-reaction. Why did I get upset? Why am I dwelling on this? I know I'm new at the job is it because I still feel I have to prove myself and that people there don't realize that I do have good ideas and understand the issues and materials we are dealing with right now? I reacted just like a school child like that time I had the teacher who did not believe in me and kept telling me I was stupid. But I do understand the material and I'm not a child any more so I shouldn't feel so threatened. Maybe Jim's manner reminded me of that teacher He did use some of the same phrases maybe that 'sit..He is a bit aggressive but he's not like the total bully that that teacher was...Some of his mannerisms are the same but he's not the same person I must remember that. I think I was frustrated also because I do know the material and when I reacted defensively it was hard for me to get it across clearly. I didn't want to be considered stupid. Let me think of the points I want to make. I'll write them down and think of a way I can express them clearly and calmly. If I take a little time thinking on that before I meet Jim today I should be clearer in the way I speak today. Yesterday caught me off guard and I fell into a knee-jerk reaction but I don't always have to do that do I? If I do that once it doesn't mean I have to do it every time it only means I did that once perhaps I can combine the suggestions in another way just present them clearly and remember that I do know what I'm trying to say. I do have good suggestions and possible solutions -.whew that feels a bit better. Is that a hummingbird over there must remember to fill the feeder so more will come around it's good to look at the bird and the roses before going into work. They clear my head. And this is almost at three pages now what other garbage can I write to get these pages done oh there goes my neighbour out to walk the dog he's very good that way and there it is I've reached the end of the page am done am done am done - until tomorrow

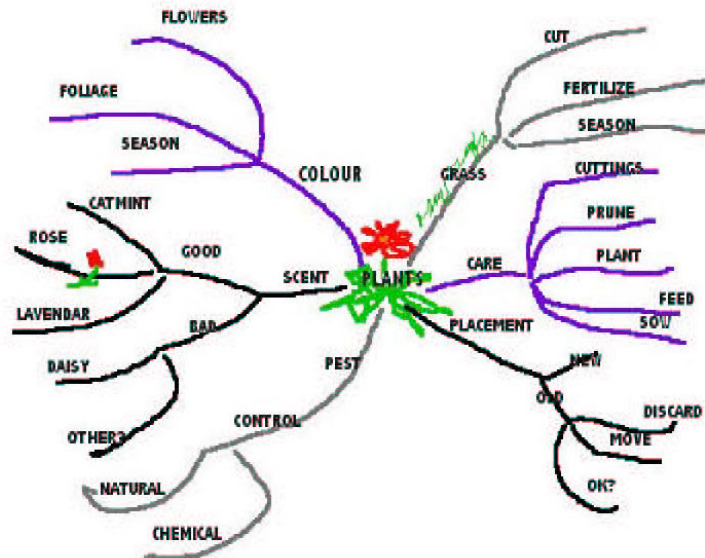
Process - How do I do it? —Write non-stop for a specified period of time or specified number of pages. Say to yourself "I will not stop writing until I have filled three pages" or "I will write non-stop for 5-10 minutes." Write down anything that comes into your mind at the moment of writing. Or talk non-

stop into your tape recorder. Speak or write without censorship. Nothing is too “silly” to write down or talk about. Don’t look at your pages or listen to your tape with a critical perspective. The point is simply to get out in a concrete form the thoughts that are running around in your brain at the moment you are doing the recording. Don’t feel you have to re-visit what you have recorded for many days.

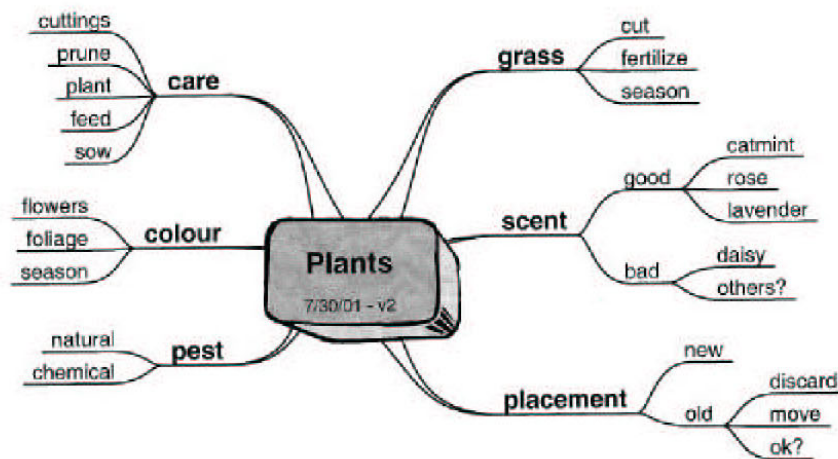
Benefits - Why should I try this? —The exercise is very freeing. It stimulates your brain, removing the constant chatter or self-talk going on in your brain and helps to clarify your thoughts. The activity removes the control of the “logic” or “censoring” part of your brain and permits the more open “artist” or “creative” part of the brain to function. This is the part that makes connections between things that may not appear to be connected on the surface but do have relationships in your subconscious. These more “hidden” connections can sometimes point the way to things that are troubling you or come up with creative solutions. By getting all the surface “running around in circles” thoughts out of your brain and on to the page it frees your mind to function more efficiently. By getting more subconscious thoughts onto the page you may discover (over time) clues to the true essence of what you are feeling plus good suggestions and possible solutions to problems you have been trying to resolve.

Mind Mapping

Sample mind maps



This mind map was created using kid pix software.



This mind map captures the same information and was created using mind-mapping software called MindManager. This software is available on a 21-day free trial from: <http://www.mindjet.com/> Please note you are entitled to educational pricing if you decide to purchase this software program.

Process - How do I do it? —The process can have layers of complexity but the basic rules of Mind Mapping are: to begin with a central image or picture that represents your topic; place this image in the centre of the page which is lying horizontally; put keys words that relate to your central image on lines

that radiate out from the central image; limit yourself to one key word per line; print or draw your key words in a way that relates to their meaning and keep the length of the line close to the length of the word; put additional key words that relate to the previous key word in declining scope off the central radiating lines; use lots of colour, images, sizes, codes – whatever works for you to give the words greater association and meaning.

Benefits - Why should I try this? —Mind Mapping is a technique developed by Tony Buzan as a form of associative note-taking that follows the natural patterns of the way your brain functions, in that the brain likes to make links or associations in a radiant manner often referred to as Radiant Thinking. The mind-mapping technique also follows the pattern of interlinking neurons within the brain and the manner in which information is transmitted from neuron to neuron. The theory is that this style of recording helps the brain to work with greater clarity and to make more associations and connections, which improves learning and retention of information. The intention is to increase mental freedom and function. It is also believed that this form of note taking increases the input of information from both the left and right hemispheres of the brain thus encouraging “whole-brain” thinking.

Synthesis of different types of journals



Process - How do I do it? —You are free to **combine** all previously described ways of keeping a reflective journal, as well as using such additional techniques as pasting in news or magazine clippings, images or

quotes that form useful associations for you. It is important to feel free to doodle, sketch or draw and to combine this with written notations if you wish. You are free to expand the size of pages by pasting on extensions to suit the format that you need for a particular entry. This is a very flexible way of working, the point being inclusiveness and the ability to respond directly and immediately to your thoughts as they occur. You are also free to record the information in the style that suits the moment and to return to it or expand on it in a different format at a later date. You have the freedom to set yourself “exercises” such as doing six doodles over a week on a particular problem or writing “stream of consciousness” thoughts on one side of the page with drawings on the other...or...or...there are many variations and combinations.

Benefits - Why should I try this? —As mentioned this is a very open, responsive and flexible way of working and does not stop you from using any of the other described techniques or from discovering new ones. It is **inclusive**. Mind Maps, clippings, Double-entry Journaling all can be part of this style. You can move between the techniques depending on the need of the moment, the issues and the material. It encourages the use of drawing or doodling and these visual tools are very useful in stimulating “open, creative mind” or “whole-brain” thinking. It brings all your material together in one location and you are free to make notations on it or work on it in a different style at a later date. It encourages an open attitude to the material and supports the concept that the gaining of knowledge and understanding is a **process**, which reveals itself in the doing and which can be approached from many different directions.

Questions and Answers about Journaling

Who keeps a journal? —Anyone can keep a journal and many individuals have found this activity to be useful and beneficial - from students to business managers to architects to Leonardo da Vinci, who is recognized as having had one of the greatest minds of all time. These are some names that you might recognize of some historical people who have engaged in this practice - John F. Kennedy, Charles Darwin, William Blake, Mark Twain, Walter H. Brattain (Nobel prize winner for discovery of the transistor effect), Christopher Columbus, James Joyce, Isaac Newton, Vincent Van Gogh, Beethoven, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Michelangelo and Pablo Picasso.

Do I have to keep a journal? —Keeping a journal will be an integral part of your course work, as you will see when you read the overview for your course. Keeping a journal will help you to understand the studied material with greater ease and to realize how it can be relevant to your personal experiences in work and life.

How much time should I spend on my journal? —You should spend some time every day recording in your journal. You will choose the time of day, the frequency and the amount of time you spend. You may choose to carry it with you and make notes, draw, or tape record your thoughts throughout the day. You may choose to reflect each morning or each evening. Experiment until you find the rhythm that suits you best.

Do I have to submit my journal? —You will not be asked to submit it. ***Your reflective journal is your private learning tool.*** However when you complete course assignments you will be asked to draw on what you have learned from keeping your journal. You will also be asked to describe how it feels to keep your journal, the patterns you discover in it, and how you use your journal as a vehicle to enhance your learning. In other words, you will be asked to share your reflections on what it is like for you to use this tool, and what you are learning in the process. You will not be asked to share the journal itself.

If I don't have to submit my journal, how will anyone know whether I am doing this activity or not? —Apart from the fact that you will not receive the benefits that this activity can provide, you will not be able to complete some of your assignments without using resources from your journal. If you have not kept a journal this will be apparent to your course instructor or facilitator.

I've never kept a journal before and don't know how to begin. Can you help? —You begin by simply beginning. Write down anything that is in your mind and then write down the next thing in your mind. If you have trouble doing this give yourself a time limit. "I will write down everything that I think or feel for the next three minutes" or, "I will fill three pages with my thoughts (any thoughts) and feelings". What you write can be as simple as "I'm really having trouble with this, I can't keep from thinking about how nice it would be to get a coffee right now" or "the chair I am sitting on is (description) and I am writing with a (description) it makes me feel (description)". You may find that soon it is hard to stop at three minutes or pages. Eventually move to starting your recording with something like "for the next five minutes I am going to record everything I can think about the article I just read - did I like it? What was I thinking as I read it? Did I hate it? Why did it make me feel this way?" In some cases "trigger questions" will be

provided in the activities for each module. You may find it easier to get started by making lists, doodling, writing key words or drawing images. Sometimes, using nonlinear processes can free you from "writer's block". The more you record the easier it will become, and you may find you look forward to keeping your reflective journal.

How do I know if I am doing this the right way? —As long as you actively maintain your reflective journal there is no "right" or "wrong" way. Remember your journal is your own personal tool for learning and growth and, although you will be expected to draw on it as a resource to complete your assignments, the only person who will observe what you have recorded in it will be you. You may, at times, feel it is really working for you, in the same way that athletes can speak of "performing in the groove", but the most important thing is to just keep maintaining it - experimenting and actively using it as a tool to explore your thoughts, feelings, questions and experiences.

I don't get it. If keeping a reflective journal is so important, why don't we have to submit it? —Because, to quote a skier, "If you're not falling you're not learning". Your failures or mistakes are some of the best learning tools you have and it's important for you to feel free to explore your experiences. Your journal gives you this freedom. You can admit that you feel uncertain about something or you can record things that you do not feel comfortable expressing publicly. In the same way that falling down is part of the process of successfully learning how to ski, part of the benefit of your journal is to provide a safe place to "fall down" in a successful learning process.

So it's a place to make a lot of mistakes? —Not quite. It's a place where you *should feel free to make as many mistakes or admit as many insecurities* as you want, but it is also much, much more than that. It is for expressing your excitement, your successes, your feelings, what you have learned, as well as special quotes or images that have become really important to you. You may choose to record moments in which you have experienced an "aha" or unexpected awareness, concepts that puzzle you, ideas you are playing with, or notes for a major project. There are few limits on what a journal can be. It is a very flexible and expandable tool or resource that exists solely for your benefit. It also is an easily available process, which can greatly enhance your growth and learning.

Is this why you have regularly linked the word reflective to the other words for a journal or log in these answers? —Yes. An important part of learning or solving problems is to remember to give your mind enough time to "digest things" and work on information. You need to trust your mind and yourself enough to allow this reflection to occur. Maintaining a journal facilitates this process.

Where else can I learn about keeping a reflective learning journal? — There are many online resources — the DROL library at TRU can help you in finding and evaluating Web resources. It is also important to realize you are a valuable resource. Keeping a journal of this type is a progressive experience. What you express in your journal will provide some direction too. It is helpful to be aware of this concept and of what is revealed to you as you progress. In addition, your tutor can provide advice.