

# Meaningful Reflection

## A Practical Approach

**Cathryn Berger Kaye**



Reflection can maximize learning if teachers understand reflective practices and know how to model them for students.

**T**he term *reflection* reaches back to the Late Latin *reflexio*, the act of bending back, from the Latin *reflectere*. Today, *to reflect* often means to have a fresh look at what we have seen, done, and learned. So take a moment now. Stop reading this article and physically bend or look backwards. What happens?

After leading this simple exercise with educators or students, I ask them to reflect on what happened from that movement. Their responses include comments about gaining a new (or different) perspective, stretching or turning, and seeing something previously unnoticed and statements about it being “good to move.” The exercise may even have woken them up a bit more—all through a moment of reflection. This creates an avenue for exploration. What is reflection in a practical, everyday sense?

### **The Value of Reflection**

The journey into reflection offers opportunities for experiences that are as diverse as the students themselves and as flexible and creative as the imagination. Why explore

reflection? I contend that reflection is an underutilized and often misunderstood process. In some situations, reflection is another box to be ticked off, and the reflections reflect that attitude:

- “We went to the nursing home. It was good.”
- “I liked the speaker. She had some helpful suggestions.”

Often, when asked by a teacher to reflect on command responding to a specific prompt at a specific time, students aim to figure out what the teacher wants and then write acceptable responses. What would it take for them to authentically engage in and appreciate the process of reflection, to welcome and look forward to the opportunity? How can teachers encourage students to move from completing “a reflection” to becoming reflective by choice?

From a practical perspective, think about what you know and have seen or perhaps even experienced from personal reflection, the kind that is of deep value. Pause. Before reading on, jot down or think about what the benefits of such reflection for learners might be.

Reflection has several different purposes, among them are the following.

**Reflection can be informative.** Reflection can deepen understanding and learning by offering a vantage point of personal relevance. Students can apply knowledge and skills with a new perspective. The process can invite learners to differentiate between cognition (thoughts) and affect (feelings). With this lens students can examine both the micro—the most significant small moments—and the macro—the totality of the experience.

**Reflection can be generative.** When generative, reflection can guide students to consider what would have been done differently in a situation. New ideas may evolve. Learners may raise questions of greater depth to provoke further connectivity with what is being experienced and make future decisions with a keener eye. If done in a collaborative way, reflection can move an entire group forward.

**Reflection can be transformative.** Reflection aligns with a key purpose of education: to gain a greater understanding of self and others. A reflective moment offers the potential for essential learning. Rather than being reactive to situations, a practice or habit of reflection helps students know how and when to press the pause button and take the necessary time to glean meaning from current, recent, or cumulative experiences. Learners can gain a sense of integrity as they construct their individual experiences and realize that their understanding may be different than others'. Reflection provides a constructive process for incorporating personal change and growth into learning.

Experiences of meaningful reflection encourage students to want to reflect again and to choose to integrate the habit of thoughtful, reflective behavior.

### What Reflection Looks Like

Reflection is often thought of as something to be done or completed, rather than a process to be experienced. Consider all the great art, music, poetry, dances, photography, and writings that have been created in moments of reflection. Can this kind of reflection be possible for students?

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Figure 1.

## Comparison Table

REFLECTION IS NOT	REFLECTION IS
Just a summary	Thoughts and feelings
Forced	Honest
Right or wrong	Varied
Good or bad	Done in many different ways
To be graded	Sometimes boring
Difficult	Difficult
A copy of what someone else said	Creative
Predictable	Descriptive
To be judged by others	Capable of building self-awareness
Done to please someone else	Necessary for learning
A waste of time	Surprising
Only written	Sometimes really fun
Only discussion	Helpful for planning
Only led by teachers	Done alone or with others

### BUILD A COMPARISON TABLE

One way is to explicitly distinguish between what reflection is not and what it is. A helpful way to initiate discussion about the reflective process is to draw up a comparison table. (See figure 1.) This is an essential part of the conceptual experience for teachers and students, particularly as they debrief their categories of reflection to explore their understanding, misconceptions, and biases. If discussed first with teachers, this exercise can guide them toward developing a collective understanding and clarification even before they lead similar exercises with their students. I offer the following sequence as a process that has proven most successful:

1. Form small groups of participants (either teachers or students). Give each group a sheet

of easel paper and markers.

2. Tell the groups to discuss what reflection is not and what it is and to place their ideas in those two categories. After about five minutes, ask whether the groups need more time. Use the groups' comments to construct a master list. Figure 1 gives examples of what may be mentioned or might be important to add.
3. Once the two lists are assembled, ask everyone whether they agree with the categorizing or whether any points need to be discussed. Aim for conversations that promote reflection as being varied, nonjudgmental, and insightful.

### PROVIDE CLARIFICATION

In addition to recognizing that some terms can fall on both sides of the equation, three topics most often emerge as needing discussion and clarification.

**Reflection is not a summary.** Typically a comment is made that reflection is not a summary, which would be correct if reflection is presented as *only* a summary. That would be a report. Explaining what happened, however, gives students an opportunity to present what is most significant from their points of view, which helps the teacher understand individual students. As part of adolescence, students frequently look at experiences from the perspective of what's in it for them, whereas the reflection process can guide students to consider what matters to them. This approach to summarizing can be rich in detail and may lead to insight.

**Know the differences between cognitive and affective expression.** Summarizing alone is not reflection, because it represents only the cognitive aspect of understanding. Through reflection students can explore the affective aspect of understanding by asking themselves, What do I feel? This leads to the second point: knowing the difference between cognitive and affective expression is essential for meaningful reflection. There are numerous ways to express a thought: *I think, know, believe, wonder, guess, surmise, propose, consider*, and so forth. There are only two ways to express a feeling: *I am* (happy, sad, elated, confused, curious) and *I feel* (happy, sad, elated, confused, curious). Our vernacular has created confusion with the advent of the phrase, "I feel that..." One

cannot feel “that.” Used this way, “feeling that” is a thought masquerading as a feeling. Knowing the difference between thoughts and feelings leads to emotional literacy, accuracy in communication, and more expressive reflection.

**Reflection should not be graded.** Teachers usually want to consider whether reflection is graded. In most situations, it’s best to avoid the grading of reflection. When graded, the process of reflection becomes a form of essay or other modality to meet the teacher’s criteria and that interferes with what may otherwise be personal and more honest. There are gray areas. If a class is studying the poetry form of haiku, and students are asked to submit their reflection as a haiku, the teacher could grade the students on whether they followed the haiku format but not on the content of their reflections.

### The Process of Reflection

Take another moment to pause and consider before reading further: if you could reflect in any modality or form, what would you choose?

Asking this question during workshops generates a wealth of responses, such as when listening to music, walking alone, having tea with a friend, reading a particular book, running, writing in a journal, drawing, practicing photography, or staring out a window. If the purpose of reflection shifts from reflecting on demand to becoming reflective, perhaps teachers could tell students about different ways they can practice reflective behavior.

By offering a range of experiences, teachers can open a door to what reflection looks like and feels like. Consider the following ways that might stimulate the desire to reflect. Which would you want to do? You may notice that the suggestions integrate varied multiple intelligences, can be adapted for 1 minute or 10 minutes, and can be done independently or with others:

- A few minutes before class ends, have students stare out the window for a minute. Then tell them to find a partner and explain a way they can apply what was discussed in class today.
- After participating in a field experience, perhaps to interact with elders in a convalescent home, have students enter the classroom in silence and draw on large sheets of butcher

paper for two minutes. Tell them to add three words to their drawing. Then, ask them to write a paragraph about their experience using two words taken from the paper.

- Following a week’s worth of study on a particularly compelling topic, have students take a photo over the weekend that captures their sentiments without any further explanation.
- Along with an assignment to read a novel or a passage from history, have students find a quote or sentence that reflects the essence of a character or a moment in time. Post them in the classroom and use them to generate discussions.
- Ask students to identify song lyrics that resonate with them after a particularly challenging or celebratory moment.
- Ask students to write using four open-ended elements to help them find their own way to expression. I created a simple template with four boxes: What happened? How do I feel? Ideas? Questions?
- If you have only one minute for reflection, try a kinesthetic pause with students simply striking a pose that represents an idea or an emotion.

Remember that reflection can be both shared and private. I know a teacher who paused after an “aha moment” in class and said, “That was powerful. I need to take a walk. Can we just get outside for about five minutes and walk once around the field? This time let’s partner up for conversations.” Consider the various forms that reflection can take and give them a try.

### Becoming Reflective

To integrate student reflection into learning, teachers must first identify moments that call for or inspire reflection. Which of the following moments would prompt you to reflect?

- When a discovery is made
- When a skill is mastered
- When a challenge seems enormous
- When an emotion is provoked
- When time flies by
- When an accomplishment deserves celebration.

With experiences that add meaning and self-knowledge, reflection develops and strengthens



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lifelong skills for learning. By understanding the purpose and practice of reflection and modeling diverse ways to reflect, teachers prepare learners to adopt reflection as a choice. Reflection can be a dynamic engaging experience that is brief, lasting a few minutes, or a sustained pause that builds awareness and deeper understanding. Imagine the benefit as students grow to appreciate reflection and select appropriate forms for a moment in time: writing, speaking, poetry, song, sound, art, dramatics, photography, or absolute silence.

### Conclusion

All too frequently, reflection is relegated to a last-minute activity. Too often, teachers confess to “not having time” for reflection, so students may arrive at a middle level or high school class with little experience or desire to participate in reflective experiences. When reflection is viewed as having minimal value, the minimal time allotment makes sense. When teachers understand the essential value of reflection to maximize learning, to integrate cognitive and affective aspects of experiences, and to establish depth of knowing, however, ensuring

that students spend time reflecting on their learning becomes time well spent.

Students learn most from the influential adults around them. As they see those adults be reflective, students are more likely to experiment with reflection themselves. Through integrating the habit of reflection, students may discover an essential ingredient for being self-aware that extends well beyond adolescence. **PL**

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