A UQ Assessment Brief on "A four-category scheme for coding and assessing the level of reflection in written work"

Reflective tasks are increasingly used in combination with other assessment requirements as a way of developing a comprehensive range of course learning objectives. Though reflective tasks need not always be used for summative purposes, when it is necessary for assessors to make and represent a judgement about the standard of reflection demonstrated, the authors of this paper argue that *disparities in terminology, frames of reference, applications and usage* indicate that the concept of reflection is ill-defined and applied inconsistently. This paper suggests four categories which can be used in assessing students' reflective work.

Abstract

Where courses have as an aim the promotion of reflective practice, it will enhance the achievement of the goal if the level of reflective thinking is assessed. To do this in a satisfactory way requires a reliable protocol for assessing the level of reflection in written work. This article presents a protocol that can be used to guide the allocation of work to four categories, namely: habitual action/non-reflection, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection. Intermediate categories can also be used. Detailed descriptors of each category to guide the process are provided. The protocol was tested by four assessors independently using it to grade a set of written work, and very good agreement was obtained (369).

Reflection

The introductory section provides an overview of the literature related to reflection and synthesises this into a series of definitional statements:

- *The subject matter of reflection is an ill-defined problem – the type of issues and cases dealt with in professional practice.*
- *In professional practice the process of reflection may be triggered by an unusual case or deliberate attempts to revisit past experiences.*
- *Reflection can occur through stimuli other than problems or disturbances to the normal routine. The stimuli may be encouraged or arranged.*
- *Reflection operates through a careful re-examination and evaluation of experience, beliefs and knowledge.*
- *Reflection most commonly involves looking back or reviewing past actions, though competent professionals can develop the ability to reflect while carrying out their practice.*
- *Reflection operates at a number of levels; the highest level of critical reflection:*
  - *necessitates a change to deep-seated, and often unconscious, beliefs and leads to new belief structures;*
  - *leads to new perspectives;*

> o *is likely to take some time so there will be significant periods between initial observations and final conclusions when perspective transformation is involved (370).*

Assessing the level of reflection

After a discussion of the need for a scheme that could be used to assess reflective work and a review of schemes already in existence, an original, four-category scheme for determining the levels of reflection in written work is explained (and summarised in an appendix) as follows (379).

Non-reflection

- *The answer shows no evidence of the student attempting to reach an understanding of the concept or theory which underpins the topic;*
- *Material has been placed into an essay without the student thinking seriously about it, trying to interpret the material, or forming a view.*
- *Largely reproduction, with or without adaptation, of the work of others.*

Understanding

- *Evidence of understanding of a concept or topic.*
- *Material is confined to theory.*
- *Reliance upon what was in the textbook or the lecture notes.*
- *Theory is not related to personal experiences, real-life applications or practical situations.*

Reflection

- *Theory is applied to practical situations*
- *Situations encountered in practice will be considered and successfully discussed in relationship to what has been taught. There will be personal insights which go beyond book theory.*

Critical reflection

- *Evidence of a change in perspective over a fundamental belief or the understanding of a key concept or phenomenon.*
- *Critical reflection is unlikely to occur frequently.*

Trial

A trial application of the scheme to the assessment of student work is outlined with results indicating its reliability in operation.

Use of the protocol

In conclusion the authors comment that:

- the scheme is applicable to a range of reflective works such as journal entries, essays and contributions to online discussions;
- users need to be familiar with the four categories;
- judgements should be holistic and reflect the highest level of reflection observed;
- some work will fall between two categories;
- the categories can be used as an A, B, C, D grading scheme, possibly augmented through the use of plus and minus;
- this scheme is a useful complement to the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs and Collis) and can be used in conjunction with discipline specific criteria;

- the scheme can also be applied for evaluation and research purposes to determine the effectiveness of approaches that promote reflection.

References

The paper provides 39 references.

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