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Expand student learning with contextualized reflective practices [1]

March 11, 2020 by Lynée Sanute | Office of Digital Education [2]

Reflective practice is a well-known concept within education, and I believe it should be integrated into all courses and programs, regardless of discipline. It has theoretical foundations in promoting lifelong learning and professional development, and readily links with metacognition. Other benefits include that it's relatively low tech, promotes an individualized experience for students, and is an opportunity to work on written communication skills.

There are multiple reflective practice models to choose from: Borton, Kolb & Fry, Argyris & Schön, Gibbs, Johns, or Brookfield. I tend to prefer models that incorporate an action plan as part of the cycle, as it moves from describing/analyzing what happened, to next steps for you as a learner.

Here are a few foundational action items that are necessary to for reflective practice to succeed in your course:

1. **Foster a supportive community**
   Reflection requires vulnerability [3] and authenticity, from both you the instructor and your students. Intentionally cultivate a classroom community where students feel safe in sharing their reflections with you (and exercise caution and judgment if you are requiring reflection in a group space).
2. **Marry theory and/or technical skill(s) with complex situations**
   Reflecting on concepts or tasks are less meaningful if they aren't contextualized by real life situations. Are there opportunities for intersection of theory and application?

   A real life example: I partnered with a faculty from the School of Public Health to design an online course covering various theories related to health behavior interventions. Students were tasked with choosing a healthy behavior to implement over the semester, analyze the theory or theories they used to implement that behavior, and reflect on the process and how it might impact intervention recommendations they make moving forward.
3. **Seek feedback**
   It may take a few iterations on including reflective practice assignments before you find the sweet spot that works for you and your students. Is it too meta to ask for reflection on reflection? Perhaps, but if you want to integrate reflection longitudinally over your course, you can move beyond learner reaction to reflecting (i.e. "I liked/disliked the reflective assignments") to insight on changes in learning and/or behavior.

In the majority of research I've found, the resounding attitude is that educators find student reflection meaningful, but struggle implementing reflective practice in their curriculum. Do you

agree? How do you use reflection in your courses? Are there more opportunities for reflective practice in your course and program?

Related Resources

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