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Teaching Writing That's Reflective

Reflection starts from a hard question – a genuinely puzzling question whose answer is not predictable. Not from an easy question whose answer is known.

The following is contributed by Dawn Mendoza:

Reflection is about dwelling on problems, contradictions, issues in which you feel pulled in more than one direction. A reflection is incomplete unless a problem is presented, and the student considers what about the problem is hard to solve, and why it's hard to solve. This runs contrary to the "master the information" idea of many writing assignments. The point of a reflection, for me, is to write about why the problem *can't* be mastered or solved easily. Platitudes and generalities emerge when writers want to tie a big pink bow of "everything's okay" on the question asked. They think making everything okay shows that they are doing a good, competent job. But the truth is that you can't do a good, competent job unless you've picked apart the hard parts and decided how to proceed in a less than perfect world – everything will NOT be okay, but some outcomes are better than others. I like to use language like "Explore the contradictions in _____." "Explain what is hard about deciding what to do in _____ situation." "Outline all the factors you must consider in order to decide what to do, and explain which factors don't seem to fit together well." If you just say "Reflect" the weak writers will avoid the problems because they fear exposing them will demonstrate incompetence.

Only those who are sophisticated in a field can take an easy question and find a way to make it hard. The novice, conversely, tends to take a hard question and try to make it easier. To get at real reflection, then, one piece of advice is to take a hard question and *let it remain hard*. Go toward the difficult question, not away from it. Accept the difficulty. Encounter it with alert attention, and notice what you're thinking and feeling as you do.

A good example of this would be two Nursing papers I've read, about caring for a dying patient. A way of putting the difficult question might be: What does "taking care" mean when you know the patient is not going to get well? There is a contradiction between the natural expectation that the

hospital's and the nurse's job is to help the patient get well and the inescapable fact that this patient is dying. How do you deal with that as a nurse?

In the better paper the student shows how she wrestled with this contradiction, e.g., by advocating with family and doctor to have a patient's morphine increased although it might hasten her death. In the weaker paper, the student basically recites platitudes such as "The best way to care for a patient is to always remember why you became a nurse." She stays in the realm of generalities. The weaker student seems to think that the job of her paper is to *minimize* the difficulty of caring for a dying patient, which is (in my opinion) a complete misunderstanding of the task.

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What we're talking about here is getting the student to go beyond the piling-up of data or quotations from sources, and write about ideas of her own. We're talking about going beyond knowledge to comprehension, which means, among other things, interpretation. The student must be an active meaning-maker, not just a knower of content. The activity involved is asking questions.

To start asking questions, the student needs to see the kinds of questions experts ask and the kinds of arguments they make in response. You, of course, are that expert in your classroom.

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When I'm tempted to ask "What does this mean?" I find it helpful, instead, to ask "What does this *say*?" "What does this mean?" tends to make students feel that there is a known answer. "What does this *say*?" does more to prod the student to make her own interpretation, to put things in her own words.

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In order to reflect, the writer must be able to deal with observed or researched realities, or with other people's ideas, without becoming overwhelmed by them. This probably means setting up a **sequence** of assignments such that the amount and complexity of material to be reflected upon gradually increases.

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A metaphor I commonly use, relating to this question of reflection, is that of "**giving the students a can-opener**." What's in the metaphorical can is insight. If I'm looking for reflection, I can't get it by handing the students a

bunch of my insights; I need to teach them a *way* of approaching the material that can yield them some insights of their own.

Here is an example from my own teaching, to illustrate this notion of the "can-opener." The specific questions are peculiar to my field, and I offer them not as something that can be transported to yours, but as an example of a *kind* of question.

(from an assignment in English 110, Introduction to Literature, about reading a poem:)

Please focus on the voice that is speaking in the poem, and your relationship with that speaking voice.

Who is speaking, to whom, and toward what goal?

What is the occasion for this speaking?

What kind of speech act is taking place here? (Here are some examples of speech acts we're all familiar with: apologies, insults, declarations of love, breaking up with someone, eulogizing someone, trying to persuade, trying to deceive, trying to take back something we said . . .)

Is the speaker addressing you alone, or are you only one member of a larger audience? Or is the speaker allowing you to overhear, while addressing someone else? (etc.)

These questions do not tell the students how to interpret any given poem. Instead they give students a number of approaches which will (I hope) help them to see what's going on in a poem of their choice. I am helping them to *think like a skilled reader of literature.*

Because different academic fields have different ways of getting at their truths, each must define its own characteristic kind of thinking – the sort of thinking that the student must master in order to stop being a novice and enter the conversation of the discipline.

This is why Writing Infusion is decentralized and discipline-based.

The development of a reflective, discipline-based writing assignment starts from: what is the kind of thinking characteristic of my field? What can I say to students, what can I ask them to do in writing, that will help them learn to think this way?

Some Thoughts on Reflection in the Context of Research Papers

We are all familiar with the undesirable version of the "research paper," the one that consists of a whole bunch of quotations glued together with almost no commentary from the writer. This undesirable paper is all knowledge and no reflection (if it even represents actual knowledge and not just busy work). Here's a thought I received from a former M.A. student in English on how such papers come about:

"Why do we do this? I think it's because we're not comfortable with the essay [form] or with our own reflections. Not only do we doubt ourselves, but we were also taught somewhere that our personal . . . thoughts don't belong in an essay. **It is impossible to have reflection without a writer who has established his or her presence.**"

This makes a crucial link between reflection and the student's relationship to the course, or her understanding of her education. If she sees herself as merely fulfilling requirements, if she thinks she's obliged to remain impersonal, or if she's approaching the assignment only by "playing defense" (avoiding having points deducted), she will find it hard to be present as a person who has something to say.

When you want reflection, the student needs to know (via the assignment) that her thoughts, her comments, her ideas, her contribution to the discussion are part of what you expect, along with accurate information, as the payoff for reading what she has written.