Reflective Writing: A Basic Introduction.

You may be asked to write reflectively for an assignment. There are many models of reflection. This handout provides basic generic guidance for reflective writing, and it is therefore vital that you follow any guidelines you may have been given to meet your course requirements.

What reflective writing is.

- It is looking back at past experience to perform better in the future.
- It analyses, explores and explains what happened and why, and usually involves incorporating models and/or theory. For this, you should use academic language.
- It considers strengths, weaknesses, anxieties and errors. You can use personal language, such as "I" and "We", when talking about observations, emotions and feelings.
- It is constructively criticising yourself, the event and often others.
- It requires evidence to support what you are saying. This includes things said or done, and their causes and effects. Therefore, it requires clear records of events and your thoughts.

How to think reflectively.

- Think about what was done. Analyse the event by thinking in depth from different perspectives. Use subject theory, reflective models and personal insight. The critical evaluation you make of your and others' actions should be applied to future events.

- Think about what happened, what did and didn't work and what you think about it.

- Critically evaluate what you would do differently in the future and explain why.

A possible structure for reflective writing.

The expression of reflection may be free and unstructured, in the sense that it might, on some courses, be in the form of a personal diary, learning journal or a narrative for design development. Nonetheless, tutors normally expect to see carefully-structured writing.

Reflection usually has the following four major components:

1. Introduction: the event, incident or topic.
2. Description and problematisation of the event.
3. Cause and effect of the critical event. Do not write too much description at this stage.
4. Explain and critique what happened, what are you trying to resolve here, what you have learnt and how you would move forwards.

An example of reflective writing.

The following example of basic reflective writing can be broken down into three parts: **description**, **interpretation** and **outcome**. First, the full example is provided. Next, it is broken down and divided into the three parts.

Full example:

"Specific tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. However, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members. Consequently, the perception of unfairness impacted on our interactions. Social interdependence theory recognises a type of group

interaction called "positive interdependence" (Johnson & Johnson, 2008, cited by Maughan & Webb, 2010) and many studies demonstrate that learning can be improved through cooperation (Maughan & Webb, 2010). We did not experience these with the initial task allocation. Nonetheless, we achieved a successful outcome through further negotiation. Therefore, we found that "cooperative learning experiences encourage higher achievement." (Maughan & Webb, 2010). To improve the process in future, perhaps we could elect a chairperson to help encourage cooperation when tasks are being allocated.

Description.

Descriptions tend to be short. They explain what happened and what is being examined.

Example:

 "Specific tasks were shared out amongst members of my team. However, the tasks were not seen as equally difficult by all team members."

Interpretation.

Intrepretation could include what is most important, interesting, useful or relevant about the object, event or idea. It could include how it can be explained, for example with theory.

Example:

Consequently, the perception of unfairness impacted on our interactions. Social interdependence theory recognises a type of group interaction called "positive interdependence" (Johnson & Johnson, 2008, cited by Maughan & Webb, 2010) and many studies demonstrate that learning can be improved through cooperation (Maughan & Webb, 2010). We did not experience these with the initial task allocation.

Outcome.

This should cover what you have learnt from the experience and what it means for your future.

Example:

Nonetheless, we achieved a successful outcome through further negotiation. Therefore, we found that "cooperative learning experiences encourage higher achievement." (Maughan & Webb, 2010). To improve the process in future, perhaps we could elect a chairperson to help encourage cooperation when tasks are being allocated.

Vocabulary.

Here are some words and phrases to help you with **description**, **interpretation** and **outcome**.

Description.

We are not suggesting specific vocabulary for description, because the range of possible events, ideas or objects on which you might reflect is so great. Nonetheless, when describing an idea, a theory or a model it is usually best to use the present tense: for example, "Social interdependence theory recognises that …".

Interpretation.

When personalising your statements, you could begin with, for example, "For me, …", "I found", "I felt" or "I believe".   Please note that you need to give your reasoning and/or evidence.

Some words for interpreting the importance or value of something:
Meaningful; significant; important; relevant; useful.

Some words used for clarifying the nature of the learning point or points:
Aspect; element; experiences; issues; ideas.

Some words and phrases used to look back and to refer to development over time:
Previously; at the time; at first; initially; subsequently; consequently; later.

Some words and phrases used to express your personal viewpoint, behaviour or action:
Thought; did not think; felt; did not feel; noticed; did not notice; questioned; did not question; realised; did not realise; did something; did not do something; expected; did not expect.

Some words and phrases used for highlighting similarity and difference.
Alternatively; equally; this is similar to; is unlike; differs from.

Some words and phrases for academic caution:
This might be; is perhaps; could be; is probably; may be seen as; suggests; indicates.

Some words and phrases for introducing reasoning or evidence:
"because"; "due to"; "explains"; "may be explained by"; "is related to".

Outcome.

Some words and phrases for describing the nature of your reflection:
Having read; experienced; applied; discussed; analysed; learnt.

Some words and phrases for explaining what you learnt from your reflection:
I now feel; think; realise; wonder; question; know; believe.

Some words and phrases for empahsis and the degree of understanding gained:
Additionally; furthermore; most importantly; I have improved; I have slightly developed.

Some words and phrases for expressing what you have gained from the experience:
My skills; understanding; knowledge of; ability to.

Some words and phrases for expressing its future value:
This knowledge; understanding; skill. Is; could be; will be. Essential; important; useful. As a learner because. As a practitioner because.

Some words and phrases for honestly acknowledging uncertainty:
Because: I did not; have not yet; am not yet certain about; am not yet confident about; do not yet know; do not yet understand.

Some words and phrases for what applying your learning to the future:
I will now need to; in a future similar situation, I would; I need to further develop my knowledge; my skills; my understanding; my responses would be different.

References:

Johnson, D., and Johnson, F. (2008). *Joining together: group theory and group skills*. New York: Pearson.

Maughan, C., and Webb, J. (2010). *Small group learning and teaching*. Retrieved from http://78.158.56.101/archive/law/resources/teaching-and-learning-practices/groups/index.html.

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