Best practices in reflection

Best Practices (see Appendix C):

- Begin communication with students before the semester begins. This sets expectations and acts as prevention for many things that can go wrong when working with multiple partners.

- Transparency; be real with your students. This facilitates openness, risk-taking, and builds the culture of co-learners and co-teachers versus the traditional teaching model which is more authoritarian.

- Consider opening each class with a brief time for students to meet in assigned small groups for checking in with one another (if you have multiple partners, it’s good practice to have students grouped by partner). Start by providing prompts that will help focus and direct discussion toward that day’s course content. This builds community and trust, which enhances connectedness and learning and helps students make connections between themselves and course content.

- When reflection journals are utilized:
  
  - Reading journals can be labor intensive; consider having a teaching assistant or service-learning scholar be your first pair of eyes.
  
  - Ask questions—and keep asking to get at deeper meaning and critical thinking. Why? Why? Why? Instructors need to be engaged in student’s learning so as not to be viewed as the disinterested teacher just collecting papers. Give students feedback throughout.
  
  - Offer opportunities for students to read each other’s journals with students’ permission. Making this a requirement can be counterproductive.
  
  - Use course materials to reflect on who students are and what they believe to foster self-awareness and identify biases.
  
  - Questions for students to consider:
    
    - What did you do (during project hours with community partners)?
    - How did you feel about it?
    - What did you discover about yourself or those you were serving?
    - Did you discover personal biases or uncover subconscious stereotypes about the group or activity?
    - How does your service work relate to course content?
• Make it clear that notes taken during class should not reflect what the instructor is saying, but how what s/he is saying relates to the individual student.

• Students often shut down when the instructor enters the conversation. Consider modeling good reflection practices and then let students take turns leading for the rest of the semester:
  
  • Best outcomes are accomplished when instructors work with the students who will be leading for the class period so that students have a structure to give the exercise shape—something more than open discussion. Those who utilize this method have found that students become increasingly engaged throughout the semester.

  • Consider allowing students to choose their own topics, within course context or content, when working with the week’s leaders.

  • Instructor serves as monitor and asks agitating questions to increase depth of discussion.

Prevention:

• Cookie cutter reflection requirements don’t always get the desired depth and critical outcomes:

  • Requiring students to read or comment on one another’s journals may impede some student’s willingness to honestly reflect.

  • Many students view this as “just one more thing” and miss the intended benefits. Offer opportunities for students to read each other’s journals, but not as a requirement.

  • Lack of structure and/or unplanned activity, relying on open discussion, frequently leads to “chatting” or complaining without the desired critical analysis. Be prepared and intentional.

  • Whenever possible, offer students opportunities to individualize reflections—use other means than written journals.