

Aspect 1: support for reflection and action planning

It is widely recognised that it is difficult to promote deep reflection and introspection on the part of students, especially at early levels of study. There is in particular a need to explain and exemplify the concept of reflection, and to provide feedback on what might constitute valuable reflection. When reflection as part of PDP is assessed, students need to be informed that it is not the personal reflective or introspective content that is being assessed, but the depth of reflection that this reveals. There is also a need to help students to differentiate conceptually between the reflective or introspective task from the mechanism of recording the outcomes of these processes. In addition, students need to be supported in creating realistic and prioritised action plans that are developmental in nature.

Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

Induction and support

- 11 How is the nature and value of PDP-related reflection explained to students?
- 12 How is feedback given on students' ability to reflect (for example, online, face-to-face)?
- 13 How are students given feedback on the content of their reflection?
- 14 How are students helped to take reflection forward to create an action plan?
- 15 How are students provided with guidance on prioritising and delivering an action plan?
- 16 How are completed action points recorded in a CV as part of the PDP process?
- 17 How is reflection and introspection supported through the design of the PDP and its templates, for example, through the use of reflective learner questions (as per the Effective Learning Framework)?
- 18 How are students shown models of good reflective and planning practice (for example, via exemplar PDP portfolios)?
- 19 How are the potential benefits of reflection and action planning demonstrated tangibly to students?
- 110 In relation to concepts of personalisation, how well does the PDP framework and delivery mechanism cope with different styles of learning and expression?

Embedding and assessment

- I11 How is the ability to reflect assessed summatively?
- I12 How are formative reflective exercises included in the syllabus?
- I13 How does the PDP framework support the review of completed and uncompleted action points?

Commentary

Can students become effective in PDP through osmosis or do the skills and understandings required to engage successfully need to be taught? From case studies, anecdotal evidence and increasingly from research, it seems that there is a strong case for supporting students in developing the skills of reflection and action planning, both of which are integral to engaging in and benefitting from PDP. This is particularly important because these activities do not necessarily come naturally to all students.

'What gets us from experience to understanding is reflection' (Hinett, 2002a; 2002b) and in the context of PDP, taking action or having a plan for action needs to be an outcome from that reflection. In other words, 'The reflective and planning skills on which the idea of PDP is based are integral to knowing how to learn in different contexts and to transfer that learning' (QAA, 2008).

Reflection

There is extensive literature on the subject of reflective practice for professionals and on the purpose and use of reflection in higher education - see, for example, the review in the HEA Engineering Subject Centre (HEA, 2009e). It seems that it is a process that some find more natural than others. According to Moon (2001):

...not all students find reflection easy when it is introduced as a specific requirement. Some will simply 'take to it', understanding its role in their learning and managing the process well. Some, however, who may be good students otherwise, will not understand what is meant by it - and will ask 'what is it that you want me to do?' It is important to recognise that some staff will not understand reflection either.

Quinton and Smallbone (2008) ask the question: 'If some students are not able rather than not willing to engage in the reflection needed to undertake PDP, what value will it hold for them?'. Clegg (2004) further explores the concept of reflection and argues for greater critical engagement with the conditions of reflection and an understanding of its limitations. Dealing with this aspect of PDP is therefore not without some difficulties, but this underpins the necessity for supporting reflection and embedding this support, so that all might benefit as far as possible. Miller et al (2008) recommended an 'academic literacies' approach to embedding reflective writing to support PDP at first-year level. Modelling by staff of reflective attitudes and approaches will also be of benefit. The HEA Engineering Subject Centre (HEA, 2009e) has some practical advice:

Students can only start reflecting if their lecturers provide them with:

- Clear guidance, in terms they can understand, as to what they should be achieving. This includes explicit intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and detailed guidance as to the process
- Detailed feedback on their work, again in terms that they can understand, that sets out the differences between what they have done and what they should have done. A great deal of thought needs to be given to how this can be accomplished efficiently and in a way that students will take notice of. Guided self-assessment or peer-assessment can be the answer here
- Guidance as to how they might repeat the learning activities more successfully. Remember, they might know that what they have done is not satisfactory, but be completely ignorant of ways in which they might do things differently
- The opportunity to repeat activities so that they can see the effects of trying new approaches.

Moon (2001, 2005) outlines some further useful reflective activities and approaches for staff to aid engagement with this aspect of PDP.

All this is in a context where there may be discipline-culture issues to consider, as some subjects lend themselves more to reflection and/or require 'deeper' reflection than others. Reflection can be structured or unstructured, depending on the context (Cottrell, 2003; Palgrave, 2009), while Moon (2001) goes on to differentiate between 'academic reflection' and 'common sense reflection', suggesting that it is worth considering, in advance, the depth of reflection that might be required for the intended learning outcome. Not all subjects require the depth of reflection that may be required by students on professional degrees (for example, education, social work or health-related disciplines), where the reflection may result in changes to an individual's behaviour at a professional level. The HEA Subject Centres (for example Law, Economics or Engineering) have useful content on reflection in the context of PDP.

In answer to the question 'How do I recognise reflective learning?' some examples of student skills, capability and attitudes relating to this process were provided by Jackson (2001a):

- able to relate teaching to their own learning;
- able to recognise, value, evidence and communicate their own learning in academic and non-academic contexts;
- able to share evidence of learning, reflect on feedback and provide feedback to others to help them learn;
- able to gather and record information on learning experiences and achievement;
- able to evaluate and recognise own strengths and weaknesses and identify ways in which perceived weaknesses might be addressed and strengths used to best advantage;
- able to learn from things that did not go according to plan;

- able to gain a deeper understanding through the process of analysis and evaluation;
- able to select from personal records and evidence of learning to demonstrate to others appropriate knowledge and abilities.

Aspect H: assessing PDP, page 42, covers issues concerned with assessing reflection.

Action planning

A focus on goal-setting and creating action plans should be at the heart of any PDP framework. According to Jackson (2001a), the core questions that underpin reflective learning and planning for self-improvement are:

- what have I learnt or done? **retrospective reflection**
- what do I need to learn or do to improve myself? **reflection on current situation**
- how do I do it? **review of opportunities and identification of personal goals or objectives**
- how will I know I've done it? **strategy for setting targets and reviewing progress.**

An additional reason for focusing attention on these aspects of PDP is that they are of particular interest to graduate employers. Planning/organisational skills, for example, were in the top 10 highly rated skills by graduate employers (Archer and Davison, 2008).

As with reflection, however, some students are more natural 'action planners' than others and will have learning styles that are congruent with the intellectual processes underlying PDP. For those who find the process more difficult, and to encourage engagement by all with this important aspect of PDP, supporting action planning through well designed PDP resources and focusing staff attention on this aspect will be helpful. For example, the Keynote Project (2002) provided exemplars of what SMART (see entry in Glossary, page 78) goals might look like in the context of PDP.

Some examples of skills, capability and attitudes relating to planning for improvement/development were provided by Jackson (2001a):

- demonstrate a responsible attitude to their own personal, educational and career development;
- able to identify what needs to be done to improve something;
- able to set realistic goals based on self-awareness and knowledge of the demands of the achievement context;
- able to recognise opportunities for new learning inside and outside the HE curriculum;
- able to create and apply a strategy for self-improvement;
- able to monitor and review progress towards the achievement of goals and targets;
- able to change the strategy if it isn't working;
- able to justify and account for their personal strategies.