

## **Facilitating reflective journaling – personal reflections on three decades of practice**

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### ***Abstract***

In what is frankly a first person account, I expand reflectively on my personal rationale and practice in the facilitation of students' reflective journaling. I have taken such journaling to entail constructive self-questioning of the demands of past or future experience, written in a personal journal which is open confidentially to the facilitator and to none other. I emphasise the need in this process for a frank or congruent relationship with the learner, and for a facilitator isolated from tutorial activity, instruction or assessment – other than perhaps in facilitating self-assessment. I expand on nudging in this context, discuss assessment of reflection, report the apparent effectiveness of the suggested type of facilitation, and consider the demands which it makes on the facilitator's time. I refer to the advice of other writers on this type of mentoring, where that is available and I have found it helpful.

**Keywords:** reflective journaling; facilitation; nudging; assessment; congruence; empathy; trust.

### ***Background***

Some thirty years ago, I was struggling to find ways to help first year students of civil engineering to develop the moderately transferable skills on which their higher level professional abilities should depend. Together with a colleague, I planned to offer developmental activities once a week. I cannot recall what brought 'The New Diary' by Tristine Rainer to my attention (Rainer, 1980). But it suggested an additional learning activity. Almost by chance, then, I conceived the notion to require my somewhat inarticulate first year engineering students to keep a weekly journal in which they would

mull over their answers to the question: 'What have I learnt about learning, or thought about thinking, which should make me more effective next week than I was last week?'. My colleague and I committed ourselves to facilitating that thinking within these journals confidentially – and speedily. The tale of these harrowing early days is reported elsewhere (Cowan, 2006). By the middle of the second term, however, the value of the activity had been established for both students and facilitators.

In the ensuing years, I have facilitated compulsory and voluntary journal writing, in hard copy and online, by undergraduate and postgraduate students, and by mature members of academic staff; in subject areas from engineering to social sciences, education and business studies. It is that accrued experience on which I have drawn to compile what follows.

## ***Introduction***

I expect learners' reflective journaling to centre on metacognitive thinking (which is thinking about one's own thinking) by learners ruminating constructively on their thinking and feeling and doing. Since this activity essentially entails dialogue with self (O'Connell and Dymont, 2011), it is by definition *intrapersonal*. It may sometimes extend to an overlying meta-metacognitive layer (which is thinking about the metacognitive thinking) in which the journal writer questions, probes and prompts their own metacognitive processes, seeking refinement and enhancement.

I take the facilitation of reflective journaling to be an activity to prompt enhancement of a learner's cognitive thinking skills and their engagement with affective matters such as values, principles and feelings. This facilitation depends upon the intimate use of interpersonal abilities (Moon, 1999a, p.23), such as the ability to sense what matters to the journal writer, and how to 'listen' as well as to explain effectively. Facilitative exchanges are thus essentially *interpersonal* and depend on intimate exchanges in which both pay attention to what the other says, writes or feels.

Reflective journaling may look backwards to what can be learnt from a compendium of recent experiences (Moon, 2006). This reflection-on-action (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, pp.91-96) is carried out with hindsight after, and usually away from, the events concerned

(Cox, 2005, p.460; Zhu, 2011, p.769). It is a more general activity than critical incident analysis (Ghaye and Lillyman, 1997; Moon, 1999a, p.209), which is a reflective analysis of the useful significance of one particular event (Tripp, 1993).

Alternatively, reflection may look forward to challenges which lie ahead. This reflection-for-action (Cowan, 2006, pp.50-55) anticipates forthcoming activity and identifies possible challenges and options, deliberating between possibilities and exploring plans for forthcoming experiences (Van Manen, 1991, p.101). It can be equated with clinical forethought (Benner et al., 1999).

There are relatively few publications containing detailed accounts of how facilitators promote the development of reflective ability (Moon, 1999a, p.167; Grossman, 2008). Hence supportive citations are sparse in the main part of this paper. I have taken the risk of offering this personal account because it is generally agreed that journal writers benefit from reviews and constructive feedback from another (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Moon, 1999b, p.82). I write here as a facilitator of both types of reflective journaling, in terms of what I myself do, and why I do it, when I am seeking to promote what is primarily intrapersonal dialogue. I do not suggest what you, the reader, should do, or what anyone else should do when facilitating. I leave it to you and other readers to work that out for yourselves.

## **Congruence**

My starting point in facilitating reflective intrapersonal dialogue is to establish a frank and trusting interpersonal relationship. By exhibiting what Rogers called congruence (Rogers, 1980), I attempt to be in touch with each student before they expect to hear from me. I try to get our relationship under way in advance of their expectations, in a form which is unexpectedly outwith academic norms as they usually know them, and distinct from the tutorial approach with which they are probably familiar. I try to establish briefly, implicitly, and without formality, that I am simply going to be a supportive person. This may be a paradigm shift for them (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, p.62), as I will not provide helpful instruction and direction as an effective tutor would do. I hope that our contact will lead naturally into a collegial or avuncular relationship, featuring trust and authenticity (Brookfield, 1990, pp.164-176), and again distinct from a typical tutor/student relationship

in which the tutor provides formative and summative judgements of the student's work. I am aware, of course, that there are other views on the desirable contact style for facilitators, preferring critical reflective comments to the provision of facilitative support (Moon, 1999a, pp.167-168).

Why do I pursue congruence, then? I want to empower each learner supportively and without exercising authority, within a ring-fenced area of activity where their self-directed learning and development will be self-assessed. I try to help them to be the best that they can be – but always leave them to decide what to do and how to do it. Often they may already have known me previously as an active instructor. But past relationships should be set aside when the facilitated reflection begins. My sole role and engagement is now merely to do what Bruner (1986) called nudging. I nudge the learners forward into Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) – where they can make more progress through prompting than they could manage on their own. I do no more than that. I certainly do not instruct or tutor.

### ***Ring-fencing our relationship***

Ring-fencing the area for facilitated learning and development is an important principle (Vlachopoulos and Cowan, 2010). Why do I wish to operate in a limited ring-fenced role? I need to find ways to encourage the students to relate to me simply as their facilitator; I should put any involvement in prior activity behind me. If they wish to have their work judged, or to receive supplementary instruction, then they should find someone else to do that. My role is simply to help them directly to be effective in whatever they do. So my facilitating should keep me within the ring-fenced personal area of the learner's reflective learning and development.

### ***Introducing myself and the task***

I do not bombard new face-to-face acquaintances with information about me; we simply grow into knowing each other. I hope my virtual student and I will grow into knowing each other similarly. I let them discover me naturally, as our relationship develops. Several students have volunteered that 'it's so much easier to be frank with you about my

difficulties when you're just a name at the foot of a screen' (Cowan, 2010b). So I would rather not describe myself or send a bio or a photograph at the outset. I'm happy to let information emerge naturally as our relationship develops.

The students should have an early opportunity to talk freely and frankly to former student journal writers about what reflective writing has meant for them. Someone should arrange for them to learn what 'stream of consciousness' writing (Cowan, 2009) entails. They should then join in groups to read and discuss the qualities of two or three reflective journal entries of above and below reasonable standard. They will be prompted to identify in their own terms the strengths and weaknesses of these examples (Weedon and Cowan, 2002; Cowan, 2002).

### ***Questioning for reflection***

When journal writers begin their reflective task, I ask them to remind themselves what reflective question they are addressing. Reflective writing, I suggest, should be focused. At any point in the written conversation with themselves, they should know what question they are trying to answer. Perhaps they will even find it helpful to write or key that question, before they begin. They should certainly feel free to change their question as they proceed. But, at any stage in reflection, they should be clear about the question whose answer they are then seeking.

In academic and professional reflection, there can be two main types of question. A student working for the first time on an investigation project can usefully reflect each week: 'What is the next challenge I have to tackle, and how should I cope with it?'. Answering such questions calls for reflection-**for**-action. Equally valuable is a question which looks back analytically on a recent experience. The student may enquire 'Which of my advice to myself last week proved effective, what did I have to change and why, and what did I introduce? What have I learnt from that for next week, then?'. Such questions call for reflection-**on**-action.

There are many possible questions and purposes for reflection (Moon, 1999a, pp. 155-158; Van Manen, 1991), just as there are many possible contexts for reflection. What is important is that the question in hand is clear at the time to the journal writer; and that it

relates to the development with which they hope and expect reflection should be able to assist them.

### ***Drawing on my own experience of reflecting***

Early on, I will briefly share with learners (using examples) three practices which have become important to me, when I myself write reflectively. The first, already mentioned, is that reflection becomes worthwhile when I specifically address a relevant question for which I do not yet have an answer, and whose answer or part answer should be useful to me. The second is that, like others (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Moon, 1999a, p.95), I have found that my reflection is opened up if I think about my immediate feelings about the question or situation before I begin to seek an answer. The third is that the most effective facilitation has occurred for me in a relationship in which journal writer and facilitator are frank and open with one another. This last practice accords with Brookfield's emphasis on 'practising what you preach' to establish a trusting relationship (Brookfield, 1993). So, when learners send me their reflection for my facilitative comments, I send them my own reflection for the same week. This enhances my current experience of being reflective, with constructive development of my own abilities (Moon, 1999a, p.188).

### ***Responding to an incoming journal***

Nowadays I ask that journals be sent to me as a Word attachment. I acknowledge this with a brief message thanking the writer, promising to be back soon with comments, and sending them my current journal in exchange, and inviting their comments in return. I read and comment on what the student journal writer has written, using the 'Comment' facility in Word. Usually I only read once, and comment as I go along. This is cost-effective use of my time. I also suspect that a student's 'stream of consciousness' writing is entitled to stream of consciousness commenting!

Some early journals will be extensive diary entries containing only a factual record (O'Connell and Dymont, 2011). In such cases I might gently comment that 'I notice that you've not written anything about the feelings which seem to lie beneath the surface of

your account so far. Would it maybe be helpful to think briefly about these - and the questions they raise for you?’

## ***Nudging***

I regularly encounter five common weaknesses in reflective journaling calling for me to nudge. These are:

- Disregard of underlying assumptions.
- Neglect of the implications, conclusions.
- Going straight for the ‘obvious’ choice, and failing to consider other possible (and difficult) options (King and Kitchener, 1994, p.201).
- Confident assertions with no justification or reason considered.
- Disregard of facts or aspects of the experience inconsistent with the on-going reflection.

When I notice any of these, I do not correct; nor do I offer specific suggestions; I just nudge the writer to explore their possibly weak thinking in more depth.

Disregarded assumptions may lead me to comment: ‘Sometimes it helps to declare your assumptions, to yourself at least, and then to check that you can substantiate them’.

If implications have been disregarded, I may comment: ‘When we make plans, it’s useful to explore the various possible outcomes. Do you feel that you did that sufficiently here?’.

When I see a fact or feature which does not seem to fit, I may comment: ‘John wonders how that fits in with the other facts you have’.

I resist the temptation to hint at the detail of missing options: ‘Here you make a straight decision about what to do. Most decision making involves thoughtful consideration of possibilities. How did you do that?’.

Unjustified assertions perhaps call for a subtle approach: ‘Would it help to explain to yourself a little more about how you got from these facts to that conclusion?’ (the question

mark protects me here). Only seldom, bluntly and maybe too bluntly: 'How would you justify this conclusion?'

I ask for, expect, and usually receive, no explicit response to my nudging.

### ***Using the cover note for specific feedforward***

I find it helpful to use the return e-mail cover note sparingly for feedforward, offering constructive advice in general terms about what to do next time (Sadler, 1998). 'You have described your experience; next time, try to go on to ask constructive questions of that experience', or 'It may help next time to concentrate your descriptions only on those aspects of the situation which are relevant in your reflection'. Or, when a risk is mentioned (Brookfield, 1994; Moon, 1999a, p.169): 'Yes, there is indeed a risk in what you suggest; not many advances are risk free. How have you decided if this one is worth taking?'. Or, constructively: 'I notice that you are asking yourself questions that I might have been asking you six weeks ago. Now you are demanding answers to your own questions. Well done!'

As a facilitating relationship develops, I occasionally find it appropriate to congruently share an experience of my own. This may be helpful for the journal writer. For example, I might empathise with someone struggling with that remarkably common student experience of having clearly and persuasively presented to her group what she is still sure was a better plan for action – only to see it rejected. She may well be asking: 'What did I do wrong? How could I tackle this kind of thing next time?'. I might comment:

Join the club! Only last month I made the case for reading/preparation time in certain exams, only to have it rejected by the exam board chair because 'It's too unconventional'. I asked 'What degree of unconventionality are you prepared to accept?'. I got nowhere, of course. Like you, I was left asking myself what I did wrong, and how I could tackle this kind of disappointment next time.

Notice I offered no advice; I simply shared a similar experience. I was hoping that this would encourage further thoughtful self-questioning about what to do next time – which in fact it did do.



## ***Time demands***

There may seem to be an inordinate amount of effort involved in my facilitation. Is it feasible within a normal workload? I will answer this important question briefly in a few factual statements:

- When I first facilitated in this way, I was committed to 18 hours per week of class contact time, three research students, my own research, a wife, three young children and a dog. I believe all had adequate attention from me.
- The workload I describe is most intense at the initial stages. It tails off steadily, or even rapidly, as the journal writers learn to self-facilitate.
- Terse, clearly worded facilitative comments are valued by journal writers for their clarity, and save the facilitator's time, too.
- During the facilitated part of learner-directed learning, there is no need to allocate resources for online tutoring.
- Feeding-forward facilitation (Black and Wiliam, 1998) earns attractively high ratings in the National Student Survey returns under feedback.
- The overall hours I have devoted to student support are compatible with national expectations – provided I am well organised in the way I handle postings!

## ***Effectiveness***

I hope that three examples will inform about the effectiveness of facilitating in this way:

Example 1: It was as a very naïve facilitator, working with a colleague who was equally naïve, that I introduced reflective journaling centred on transferable abilities for first year students of civil engineering. Our students were taught first year maths, physics and chemistry together with mechanical and electrical engineers. Those who did well in our arrangements for their reflective reviewing of the development of their abilities, moved up the ranking order in the overall first year class in these three common subjects, and they tended to retain their improved positions in later years (Cowan, 1987).

Example 2: After example 1 had been in place for a few years, Graham Gibbs invited himself to interview second year students about their unusual experience in their first year.

To my surprise, he reported confidentially having met a number, perhaps 25%, who went on keeping reflective journals in their second year – although these were not required of them, and were not facilitated. They found it useful, they told him. I cannot think of any other coursework which students do without being so required.

Example 3: I recently tutored a part-time post-graduate student of business studies who was required in a project module to keep a weekly reflective journal. She struggled with her first couple of submissions. She has subsequently published her strong conviction that the journaling was her most important academic experience in that particular module. So much is this so that she keeps a journal whenever asked to tackle a new challenge at work, and has been encouraging several of her colleagues to do likewise (Cowan and Cherry, 2012).

### ***Inappropriate reflections***

A student who has found reflection helpful might write a journal entry agonising about how to repair a fractured friendship, or how to cope with the onset of acute depression, or whether or not to have an abortion. These are not academic matters, and should not concern an academic facilitator. I have been confronted only once with each of these three examples of non-academic reflection. I have found that a simple facilitative nudge to consider who best to consult has led to the concern being referred to the appropriate professional. This took the matter outwith the ring-fence.

### ***Confidentiality and privacy***

I resist the emotive argument in defence of a journal writer's right to absolute privacy (Biggs, 1999, p.262; Moon, 1999a, p.196). That privacy may be valid in the case of a personal diary. But the journaling which I facilitate is explicitly and formatively concerned with the development of abilities which are professional priorities for the journal writer and intended learning outcomes for the course team. It thus seems to me appropriate and desirable that the student should have access to formative academic facilitation, to support their self-managed development of these relevant abilities. So I see no problem, nor apparently do my students, in my having access to what they are writing, thinking and

planning – provided our relationship is such that my function is constructive and confidential and trustworthy.

### ***Teacher-assessment of reflection***

But should this reflecting be assessed and, if so, how? If you wish to pursue this complex issue and the debate around it, you will find a useful starting point in Moon (Moon, 1999b, pp.91-93). She sets out the reasons for assessment (Moon, 2004, pp.155-156) and those against (Moon, 2004, p.150). The distinction, for her and for me, lies in whether the reflection is a process or a product (Moon, 1999b, p.94). Assessing on the evidence of competency in reflective practice features in Moon (1999a, p.198; with other examples in Moon, 1999b, pp.98-104). There is also rich coverage of assessment of reflection in Brockbank and McGill (1998, pp.193-205), and more recently in Bourner (2003) and Leijen et al. (2011). These feature deep issues which have been discussed at length elsewhere – but which, fortunately, lie outwith the ring-fence within which my style of facilitator operates.

In that detached position, I see three problems with teacher-assessment of reflection. The first is the natural inclination of cue-conscious and cue-seeking reflective learners (Miller and Parlett, 1974) to concentrate on the hidden curriculum of assessment (Snyder, 1973; Sambell and McDowell, 1998), and to deliberately mould their reflective behaviour in that direction. Sadly they then write for others and not for themselves. My second problem is the usual limitation of any scheme involving predetermined criteria and objectives; intended learning outcomes leave no flexibility to cater for the variable and valuable unintended learning outcomes (Biggs, 1999) which should be a notable feature of individualised learning and development. My third problem is that the content of assessed reflective journals passes into the semi-public domain, and is likely to be discussed by more than the journal writer and the facilitator. Even where the journal content is purely academic, this semi-public scrutiny may embarrass, and constrain, both parties. A common hazard in this respect is reflection on difficulties allegedly generated by a colleague of the assessor.

## ***Self-assessment of reflection***

I have reported elsewhere, mainly in partnership with student writers (Boyd and Cowan, 1986; Cowan et al., 1999), regarding the impact of self-assessment on student learning and development. All my ventures in this area have assumed a first tentative and commitment-free experience in which students test the authenticity of the offer to self-assess (Cowan, 1988). The literature on this approach is now strongly persuasive (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Boud, 2009). The key finding seems to be that the students take responsibility for choosing and formulating aims and criteria. Consequently they become constructively involved in monitoring, reviewing and (in the fullness of time) assembling a summative self-assessment (Cowan, 2010a). That rationale certainly commends full self-assessment to me, if assessment of reflective activity is desired.

## ***Is facilitation worth the effort?***

I constantly experience great joy from seeing students of all levels of ability reflecting and hence maturing, becoming self-sufficient, and thinking critically as adults. As our relationship proceeds, the need for my facilitation drops off. Sometimes my only comment to them is that 'I found nothing on which to make a facilitative comment, which is a comment in itself'. Around this stage, students may tell me in their covering note that 'I do not think I need you any more, John. I've been anticipating your comments and responding to them as I went along'. When this redundancy emerges, I joyfully discover once again what Carl Rogers envisaged in his first edition of 'Freedom to Learn' (Rogers, 1969), which was tellingly sub-titled 'A view of what education might become'.

## ***And when it is all over?***

As a facilitator, I often feel a fleeting empathy with parent birds that have cared for and raised their chicks from before the moment when they broke out of their shells. The parents have hunted for food and brought it back to the nest to feed their constantly hungry offspring. They have protected their young in their formative years. They have judged the moment to urge them to spread their wings and fly in a safe environment. And so one day the chicks take off confidently, and fly away – without a backward look or

acknowledgement, knowing that they are doing this in their own strength and will be self-sufficient in the exciting life ahead of them.

It must be a somewhat sad time for the parent birds, just as it is for a facilitator of academic development. But I would not for a moment have it otherwise.

## ***Second thoughts***

Has this just been a review of one practice repeated on thirty consecutive occasions? I hope not, and believe not. Fairly authoritarian commenting was soon replaced by non-judgemental facilitation; increasingly sensitivity to affective needs emerged, and featured in the facilitation; the dialogue between facilitative tutor and learner developed, and became a valued feature for both. My account does not do justice to this learning on my part, but it has surely been there.

## ***Acknowledgements***

I am deeply grateful to Pauline Ridley, whose enthusiasm and encouragement led me to engage in the pleasant task of reminiscing in order to bring these thoughts together. I am also grateful to John Hilsdon and the JLDHE reviewers for assisting me to get them into a form suitable for publication.

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In 1971 **John Cowan** created what was to become the largest departmental unit for resource-based learning in the UK. He innovated by enabling his students to learn in their own ways, and with objectives chosen by themselves. He was a pioneer of accredited self-assessment, the first professor of Engineering Education in the UK, a signatory to the Education for Capability Manifesto, and Open University Scottish Director and Professor of Learning Development until 1997. He has facilitated reflective journaling since 1982, and is still so facilitating.