Chapter X
Mining for Meaning:
Teaching Students How to Reflect

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the challenges and benefits of using reflection in ePortfolios, and reviews strategies for teaching and encouraging deep reflection. It includes a brief history of the use of reflection in portfolios, summaries of the main types of reflection, and general approaches for the development of student reflection. Barriers to successful reflection, such as inexperienced students and faculty, student fear and distrust of reflection, formulaic responses, and time constraints will be examined, and solutions will be proposed. The effects of the ePortfolio on reflection and the possibilities offered by technological advances and new software also will be reviewed. The chapter argues that faculty must carefully construct reflection learning objectives if they expect meaningful summative or formative assessment to take place. The author hopes that the discussion of prompts, scaffolding, cycling, and other mining techniques will help instructors transform reflection theory into practice.

INTRODUCTION
As any parent of a toddler knows, one of a young child’s favorite words is “why.” Children need to know and understand the new world they are exploring, and they have no inhibitions about asking probing and at times unsettling questions. That same quest for answers lies at the heart of adult reflection as well. Although the questions reflected upon become more complex, the same drive for understanding underlies the process. Unfortunately, for many, that quest seems to become less natural with maturity.

Development of the ability to understand and engage in higher-order thinking—to reflect deeply and analyze critically—has been implicit in the definition of higher education. For many years, reflection has been a teaching and learning cornerstone in diverse disciplines, ranging
from creative writing and teacher education to engineering, health, and the sciences. These disciplines also often use portfolios for formative and summative evaluation of student work and rely heavily on reflection for these assessments.

In the last decade, a number of universities, programs, and courses have moved from paper to electronic portfolios. Reflection is a vital component of a successful ePortfolio. Without reflection, the ePortfolio is merely storage. With reflection, it becomes, as numerous researchers and instructors have pointed out, a story—a narrative of exploration and learning that ideally would build recursively throughout the author’s lifetime. As more institutions offer graduates lifetime access to their ePortfolios, the potential of reflective portfolios for truly lifelong learning could be realized as graduates add material to their ePortfolios and reflect upon their studies, careers, and lives using each “chapter” of their lives to plan for the unfolding chapters.

This is a powerful tool for student development as well as for more traditional academic assessment, but translating theory about reflection into practical classroom experience often is frustrating for students and faculty alike. This chapter examines the challenges and benefits of using reflection in ePortfolios and reviews best practices for teaching and encouraging deep reflection. It includes a brief history of the use of reflection in portfolios, summaries of the main types of reflection, and general strategies for the development of student reflection. Barriers to successful reflection, such as inexperienced students and faculty, student fear and distrust of reflection, formulaic responses, and time constraints will be examined. Faculty must carefully construct reflection course objectives if they expect meaningful summative or formative assessment to take place. Although each discipline, course, and group of students will require its own goals and approach to reflection, this review of prompts, scaffolding, cycling, and other mining techniques can be used and adapted by instructors across the curriculum to help transform reflection theory into practice. Instructors seeking specific prompts or discipline-specific articles about reflection will have no difficulty finding sources and are advised to do this research before using reflection in ePortfolio assignments.

This chapter will reflect on why and how to use reflection. May the author’s reflections inspire the readers’.

BACKGROUND

Like most academic subjects, reflection can be slippery to define. Reflection’s definitions, discourses, and practical applications are as wide ranging as the disciplines encompassed by higher education.

Human beings like to think of themselves as reflective creatures, and at some level we all are reflective. The saints confess, the monks contemplate, the great authors keep journals, the scholars write treatises, and high school girls scribble in diaries—all in pursuit of understanding ideas, themselves, and the world. We have a history of thought about thought. But not all reflection is equal, and in the fractured academic world, each discipline privileges different definitions and approaches.

Although this chapter will review several definitions, a general working definition can perhaps be agreed upon, at least insofar as it will serve as a useful starting point for students as well as faculty. Reflection can be defined as much by what it is not as what it is. Reflection is not summary. A reflective journal is not a laundry list of the quotidian. A reflective story is not a plot without a theme. A reflection is not