Teaching Critical Reflection to Graduate Students

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Abstract

Critical reflection is a highly valued and widely applied learning approach in higher education. There are many benefits associated with engaging in critical reflection, and it is often integrated into the design of graduate level courses on university teaching as a life-long learning strategy to help ensure that learners build their capacity as critical reflective teaching practitioners. Despite its broad application and learning benefits, students often find the process of engaging in critical reflection inherently challenging. This paper explores the challenge associated with incorporating critical reflection into a graduate course on University Teaching at the University of Guelph. Strategies for effectively incorporating critical reflection are presented, based largely on Arsonson's (2011) framework for teaching critical reflection and the outcomes of a workshop offered at the 2013 STLHE Conference. The strategies discussed have multidisciplinary relevance, and can be broadly applied to improve how critical reflection is incorporated into post-secondary courses.

Introduction

Critical reflection, as a practice, has been recognized as a valuable tool for learning across multiple disciplines. For example, see Elizabeth Smith's (2011) publication for a list of social and health-related disciplines where critical reflection is seen as "particularly important" (p. 211) as it supports the on-going development of these practitioners and, in turn, improves the experience of patient care. We value critical reflection in our personal practice as educators and educational developers (Brookfield, 1995). At the same time, there is widespread confusion about just what critical reflection is. For example, Mezirow (1990) emphasizes that critical reflection involves identifying, acknowledging and unearthing our presuppositions, assumptions and beliefs, as a larger process of reflecting back on our prior learning to determine whether they are now justified under present circumstances and contexts. In Rogers' (2001) concept analysis of critical reflection in higher education, he lists confounding assumptions students might hold when we, as educators, ask for "reflection": Is it self-reflection? Reflection? Contemplation? Introspection? Given that these meaning are often used "interchangeably" (p. 40), it may be helpful to view critical reflection as a process where students actively engage with a (most often first-hand and meaningful) situation with the intention to "integrate the understanding gained into [the student's] experience in order to enable better choices or actions in the future as well to enhance [the student's] overall effectiveness" (Rogers, 2001, p. 41) as educators.

Our "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1995) related to critical reflection and UNIV*6800, a graduate course in University Teaching and Learning offered at the University of Guelph, is that each year we have struggled as educators to effectively incorporate critical reflection. Not surprisingly, as critical reflection challenges even "the most skilled of educators", "fostering it in students remains an ongoing dilemma" (Rogers, 2001, p. 54). The following essay presents a narrative of our journey to exploring how we will best approach our disorienting dilemma related to "teaching" critical reflection. We have framed our discussion largely upon

Aronson's (2011) framework for teaching critical reflection and the outcomes from our workshop at the 2013 STLHE Conference.

Our Case
UNIV*6800 (University Teaching: Theory and Practice) is a for-credit, pass/fail, interdisciplinary graduate course offered at the University of Guelph, with a yearly enrolment of 25-40 students. The course is designed to provide an opportunity for graduate students to critically examine and reflect on teaching and learning strategies and research in higher education, while developing pedagogical skills and strategies that are appropriate within the context of their discipline. As summarized in the 2013 course syllabus, the overarching goal of the course is to foster the development of a lifelong interest in teaching and learning in higher education. Critical reflection is core to both the philosophy and delivering of the course, and is incorporated explicitly as one of the course learning objectives: "Upon successful completion of the course [learners] will be able to:…reflect critically on [their] learning and teaching practices, in both disciplinary and broader contexts." We fully recognize the inherent challenges of "teaching" both the principles and practices of university teaching within the confines of a 12-week semester. As such, the course is designed to support learners' development as critically reflective teaching practitioners so that they are able to integrate new practices into the ever-changing and emerging contexts in higher education once they have completed the course. Thus, the act of "teaching" critical reflection within this course context links powerfully to the STLHE 2013 Conference theme with its focus on learning for life.

The Dilemma

Feedback from students over the course of four years appears to identify concern regarding the submitted critical reflections and final reflective report. For example, in 2012 60% of students who submitted course feedback indicated that critical reflection assignments were the "least useful aspect" of the course. In previous years, students have communicated their criticism: "I strongly dislike reflective journals despite recognizing their value." This is not to say that they are universally disliked: "[The critical reflections] really allowed me time to think about who I am as a learner, teacher and person."

In response to student feedback, the critical reflection assignments have changed from year to year. Each year, for example, students have commented that "too many" critical reflections were required throughout the semester, and that the tempo of submission made critical reflection feel like busy work. In the 2006 course offering, students had to complete ten reflective entries and a final reflective report on the entries. In the 2010 offering, the number of entries had been reduced to six with a final reflective report. Last year (2012), students completed three entries, including the final reflective report.

When reading students' work and providing them with feedback, we have noticed disciplinary differences in the quality of the critical reflections. This has been echoed in student feedback: "I struggled with getting the right flow with these reflections and it took me a while to really get into a deeper level of reflection. Coming from a traditionally 'hard science' background, reflections are not something that are encouraged or spoken of." It is our opinion that taken as a whole, students are not getting to the level of critical reflection that we expect. In summary, we find that students struggle getting to a deeper level of critical reflection and the changes that we have made to assist students to "get there" do not appear to be working.

"Teaching" Critical Reflection

A core assumption about developing the skills of critical reflection is that it is inherently a learner-centred endeavour. Accordingly, our responsibility as the instructors of UNIV*6800 is to help students refine their own understanding of what critical reflection is and how to "do it" by designing experiences and assignments and providing formative feedback (rather than simply delivering information) on what constitutes critical reflection.

So, in regard to the disorienting dilemma of critical reflection and UNIV*6800, the question becomes: how can we design learning experiences, assignments and provide feedback in such a way that students see more "usefulness" in their course work related to critical reflection – while also improving the outcomes of their learning experiences? During our STLHE workshop, we presented a case outlining how critical reflection had been integrated into the course, highlighted our dilemma above and turned to the collective wisdom of the workshop participants to help identify what their recommendations would be if providing us feedback. From the workshop discussion, the following themes emerged:

- get students to describe what critical reflection might be in their discipline as a way to initially engage;
- make the submissions, especially the early stages, lower stakes;
- provide a range of alternative submission types (vs. only written submissions);
- scaffold, or, gradually introduce the skills of critical reflection;
- provide prompts that students will find engaging (i.e. are more authentic to their personal perspective); and,
- model critical reflection ourselves.

We were pleased to see that many of these characteristics align with 'good' curriculum design principles as described by Meyers and Nulty (2009).

In preparation for the workshop, we reviewed the literature surrounding critical reflection. The paper that offered the most direct advice was by Aronson (2011). The following twelve tips, presented in the paper and summarized below, have multi-disciplinary relevance:

1. Define reflection
2. Decide on learning goals for the reflective exercise
3. Choose an appropriate instructional method for the reflection
4. Decide on using a structured or unstructured approach and create a prompt
5. Make a plan for dealing with ethical and emotional concerns
6. Create a mechanism to follow-up on learners' plans
7. Create a conducive learning environment
8. Teach learners about reflection before asking them to do it
9. Provide feedback and follow-up
10. Assess the reflection
11. Make reflection part of the larger curriculum to encourage it
12. Reflect on the process of teaching reflection

Building upon Aronson's recommendations, below we provide a framework for the use of critical reflection in courses related to preparing future faculty. For instructors considering the use of incorporating critical reflection, it would be important to **link the learning objectives of the critical reflection assignments to course learning objectives and activities**. Aronson

suggests that in doing so, the perceptions on the part of students that critical reflection is an "add-on" can be reduced. In the case of a graduate course on university teaching and learning, it might be easy to encourage students to reflect on action (Schön, 1983) or reflect *after* a concurrent teaching experience. Not all graduate students enrolled in the course, however, have concurrent teaching appointments, or have had the opportunity to teach in a classroom as a TA or instructor. Since we have students with heterogeneous experiences related to teaching, it will be more of a challenge to ensure the authenticity of the reflective activity by linking to direct experience.

Assignment design is important to consider before the start of the course. Designing **what the critical reflection exercise will "look" like**, including **how you will prompt students for reflection** and **how the reflection will be assessed,** ought to be considered and planned. Written reflection, in the form of journals or logs, is a well-established assignment type. What is clear from literature such as that by O'Connell and Dyment (2011), is that there should be some thought given to the kind of reflection sought from students and aligning it to an appropriate type of submission.

One interesting possibility comes from Wald, Davis, Reid, Monroe and Borkan (2009), where students submitted written reflection to two course instructors via email. They advocated for the assignment design of "interactive journals (with a reader who provides guidance)—in contrast to isolated writing— ... as a means of fostering a more in-depth reflective process" (Wald, et al., 2009, p. 831). In their paper, Wald and colleagues implicitly identify the important link between the design of submissions and form of assessment to a course's objectives of developing critical reflection in students. This iterative process also links directly with Aronson's tip, **following up on students' conclusions from reflections**, where a student can have the opportunity to report on the results of any plans made from critical reflection that they have turned into action.

Offering prompts for reflection has been identified as a way of lowering the cognitive load for students — by providing a dilemma, students can focus on the act of reflecting critically, rather than being pre-occupied with looking for their own challenge to reflect on. There could be some latitude offered to students by providing a number of prompts to choose from. This strategy also offers the benefit of (potentially) increasing the relevance of the activity by allowing them to choose the most personally engaging prompt, which can help scaffold learning about critical reflection. One concern with this approach is that it more prescriptive in nature and allows less latitude for different kinds of submissions. Beyond prompts, other techniques can be used to scaffold students' learning of critical reflection assignment design. Not all critical reflection, for example, needs to be long in its creation. Aronson describes how "reflection artifacts can be produced in class or as homework" (p. 201), with the artifacts produced in class (potentially) taking less time to produce.

Implicit in this scaffold design is the **importance of feedback** and **assessment**. While formative feedback is a key component of developing a student's ability to critically reflect, it is also an important consideration because it in part drives student motivation and engagement in the learning activity (Kember, McKay, Sinclair, & Wong, 2008). The link between assessment and motivation should not be under-emphasized as it is clear from our students' feedback that, regardless of how difficult critical reflection was to do, because they were motivated by assessment to complete the critical reflections, they learned something. Kember et al. (2008) share a four category schema they developed to assess written critical reflections, which range from non-reflection (the least sophisticated), to understanding, to reflection and finally to critical

reflection (the most sophisticated), which could easily be adapted to create a rubric to help explicitly define criteria for assessment.

As Rogers writes (2001), when speaking about critical reflection, "further dialogue ... [is] needed to simplify and clarify terminology so that faculty and students understand each other as well as possible" (p. 40). This, in turn, links to the need to **define reflection**. Offering a definition makes the implicit explicit for the learner. Providing definitions, however, might not be sufficient for a student to "get" the difference between their own understanding and the kind of analysis that is expected of them. Certainly, if you develop guidelines for assessment, it would make sense to share them before students submit their work. Even more useful, **have learners evaluate others' reflection before asking them to do it themselves**. By providing learners with an anonymous sample of student reflection and asking them to evaluate it using an assessment tool (as well as identifying, for example, what the successful components of the work were), you are engaging students in a meta-cognitive practice. The theorized benefit of this activity is that students would gain a better understanding of the components that "make up" a critical reflection and, in turn, would improve the quality of their own submissions.

Aronson succinctly writes that to succeed, "reflective exercises require the establishment of positive learning climate through the use of an authentic context and creation of a safe and supportive environment for reflection" (p. 202). Anderson, broadly writing about faculty's role in "promoting effective alliances within the classroom" (1999, p. 70), suggests that students bring tacitly held assumptions concerning responsibilities for learning to the classroom. Taking time to explicitly discuss the characteristics that students want and need from classmates and instructors is a first step in establishing a positive learning environment. Given the often personal nature of self-disclosure with critical reflection, even if self-disclosure with peers is not planned as a part of the critical reflection assignment, it is likely even more important for classroom participants to establish a **conducive learning environment** and the mechanisms to hold members accountable.

As our workshop participants and Aronson (2011) identified, there is significance in the act of practicing critical reflection as instructors. If these reflections are on-going over the duration of the course, you could consider making your journal available to students. In this way, not only would you be growing the skills of critical reflection and engaging in the praxis of critical reflection, but you would also be modelling it for students.

Throw Out the Prescription and Iterate

Critical reflection is hard. There is not a singular, easy answer to help foster the growth of critical reflection in others. Taking characteristics and strategies for best practices in student learning and applying them to the challenge of "teaching" critical reflection, as we have done above, offers one approach. The framework described here involves careful planning to consider a variety of approaches and creating a plan that introduces critical reflection, builds the skill and engages students. It is clear, after reading the varied literature on introducing critical reflection into the classroom, that there are small but significant changes that can be introduced to the UNIV*6800 classroom with the goal of continuously improving students' learning experiences and outcomes.

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