The ”reflection protocol” – a way to develop learning and independent thinking?

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Is there a need to develop new learning methods in higher education?

The Swedish university system has grown from just over 40,000 students in the mid-1960s to more than 400,000 at the beginning of the 21st century (www.scb.se), now with many more students with poor former study traditions. It is possible to claim that the education system has been transformed from an “elite-university” to a “mass-university”. In higher education the main goals are to develop the students’ ability to: “/…/ make independent and critical judgements and the ability to independently distinguish, formulate and solve problems /…/” (Note: Our translation) (SFS, 1992:1434. “Swedish University Law”, 9 §) Behind this, there is also an assumption about what knowledge is, how to develop new knowledge and how to learn. A lot of different opinions concerning these questions exist. Among other things, this has given rise to a need to develop new ways and methods of teaching, also at university level. Accordingly, using and trying to find out new forms of learning methods is nowadays more and more common also in the academic world. One of these methods is the so-called "reflection protocol"\(^1\), which may be seen as an alternative to more traditional learning methods. We have no idea how often the "reflection protocol” is used, but we meet it more and more often in the university college where we work. There seem to be a lot of different opinions about the value of using this method. Some teachers and students are enthusiastic and others are rather critical. From our point of view we, however, see the "reflection protocol” as a method that is possible to use for many different reasons, for example, as a way both to discover and to develop the students’ ability to think for themselves. But, is it also possible to use as an instrument to assess whether students have learned what they are supposed to, as it says in the curriculum? In this paper, we will discuss if this might be the case and especially we will elaborate on the questions:

- What is a "reflection protocol” and what is it supposed to reflect?
- Why use ”reflection protocols” and how?
- What conclusions may be drawn about how the ”reflection protocol” impacts on the learning process?

Due to the limited space available, we will, of course, only have a very superficial opportunity to elaborate on these questions.

\(^1\) There seems to be no accurate translation to the Swedish word, “reflektionsprotokoll”. We have chosen between “reflection protocol” and “reflection journal”.

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What is a "reflection protocol" and what is it supposed to reflect?

A "reflection protocol" usually consists of one or a few pages of freely written text related to something the students have read as a part of their studies. There are usually no direct demands on a special form and content in a "reflection protocol", but the reflections must, in some way or another, more or less freely, be related to the text the students have studied. Accordingly, writing a "reflection protocol" is not a summary, not a review, not even an analysis of a text. Instead it is about writing down thoughts and questions that come up as a result of the reading. It is also about making associations interpreting a text and relating this to some kind of theme. The "reflection protocol" could, from these points of view, be seen as a very open and creative learning instrument. We will here also give an example of how this is explained and used in the course: *Teaching in Higher Education*, in a university college in Sweden, with university teachers as participants:

The literature in the course is to be worked on and presented by means of "reflection protocols". The purpose of using the "reflection protocol" is to make the content of the course your own knowledge through a reflective and critical way of relating to a text.

In the "reflection protocol", you should:
1. Formulate your own thoughts in relation to the text – NOT review the text
2. Show a personal relation to the text
3. Reflect on, analyse and critically revise the text.

When you are reading, think about what you consider to be remarkable, interesting, questionable etc. and give reasons why at the same time as you refer to the literature. The knowledge should be shown to be problematic and not reproduced – reflect on what possibilities theories, models and research results have to explain and what possibilities and limitations they have in order to give a better understanding of different phenomena. The point of departure is that reality is complicated and possible to interpret in different ways. (Note: Our translation)

When we talk about reflecting it could be useful to say something how the quite slippery term “reflect” might be defined and understood. The term "reflection" is derived from the Latin term reflectere meaning "to bend back, or to look back." (http://www.slu.edu/colleges/businesscenters/Service_Leadership/Activities.html)
Reflection differs from “everyday-thinking” or “thinking deeply” as it is evidently goal-oriented, in that it is carried out and structured in some kind of systematic way with the purpose of creating distance from old thinking patterns and developing new ones and finding solutions to problems. (Emsheimer, & Hansson, Koppfeldt, 2005:5. Note: Our translation)

What does reflecting refer to when it comes to learning processes? Molander (2003) says that to reflect is to think about how you act and what you are doing in order to get a perspective on a situation in order not to get totally involved in your own actions. We look upon reflecting as an activity where an individual tries to understand her own and others’ acting. This might be equally true in relation to a text you are reading. A main function of reflecting is to establish a distance between yourself and your own praxis. Reflection creates a preliminary statement in a cause-effect relation question as a way of starting a thinking process. Our reflections will create a deeper insight into how we may understand reality. Is reflecting also the same as critical thinking? Ennis (1969), for example, defines critical thinking as a correct estimation or evaluation of a statement. Is reflecting a possible way to reach this position? On the other hand, what is a correct estimation? How do we know what is right or wrong when there are a lot of questions to which having different, more or less correct answers seems possible? In the academic world, we are usually aware of this broad panorama of different perceptions of what knowledge is, at least in the sense that, hopefully, we have a broad awareness of the complex nature of knowledge. (See for example, Berger & Luckmann, 1979). Reflecting may be a useful way of broadening your thinking.

What is then reflecting on the very concrete level? Is it when you get new thoughts as a result of something you have read and is one thought as good as any other? It is also possible that one might not foresee what kind of reflections reading a text will finally produce. Is reflecting only a metaphorical way of claiming that new associations have been born from what you have read and are those thoughts the same thing as new knowledge or are they just opinions? The knowledge concept ² (See, for example, Gustavsson, 2002) is extremely hard to define and also very complex, unlike its everyday use, where we often have a rather fixed perceptions about reality, stretching from scientific knowledge finally to what we usually call

² The concept knowledge is, of course, a very complex one and that has been discussed and elaborated on since the ancient Greeks.
tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1978, Rolf, 1991) and over to what we seem to know nothing about, a field where we have to believe.

The thoughts generated in a "reflection protocol" might, as expected, show a wide variety depending on what experiences the individual has in every single case. We have to make the assumption that it is people’s experiences that create their picture of reality and this has importance for what reflections can be made. If we do not know what those perceptions are, we cannot know what knowledge a person has. The consequences of what a person thinks he knows are made clear from the so-called theorem made by Thomas: “if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences.” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928:572) This means what reality actually is like does not have any importance. Instead the decisive question is how a person perceives reality, so to speak, how it is described and interpreted by the single individual in a single case. Using the "reflection protocol" makes it possible to compare students’ different ways of perceiving reality and this makes it possible to initiate a dialogue about different ways of interpreting the same part of reality. Are those very different perceptions of reality and different opinions, or are they at the same time a more complex understanding of a phenomenon?

An interesting and tricky question is whether a "reflection protocol" may function as an instrument for examining a course, or a part of a course. Is it, for example, possible for a student to write a "reflection protocol" and fail? Is there a hidden code when judging "reflection protocols"? If it were possible to dismiss what a student has written in a "reflection protocol", there must also, in that case, be some kind of criteria that the text could be related to. Something that tells us what is right and what is wrong. A thought is a thought. It seems, however, impossible to formulate such criteria beyond saying that it seems possible to claim that the reflections ought to be related to the text read in some way or other. What is right and what is wrong may vary enormously from things that almost everyone holds to be true, for example, the statement that this is a chair³, to things for which we may probably never get an answer, for example, does God exist and the whole spectrum lying between these statements. From what we have claimed, so far, we do not think it is possible to regard a "reflection protocol" as right or wrong in relation to something. In this sense, it seems impossible to use the "reflection protocol" as a method of examination. But, on the other

³ However, philosophers dispute whether we can be sure that the chair really exists.
hand, the "reflection protocol" may give a teacher a clue about whether and how a student elaborates on a theme. We think it also would be possible to have an opinion about what kind of quality these reflections have. Do the reflections make sense? Do they define and make clear a problem; are there contradictions and ambiguities; what about the structure; are the statements underpinned with arguments and so on? From these points of view, it must also be possible to assess a "reflection protocol".

**Why use "reflection protocols", and how?**

The purpose of using "reflection protocols" is, as we see it, mainly for the student to practice independent thinking from a scholarly point of view, but also to criticise the scholarly way of thinking. It also gives an opportunity to achieve a better understanding of your own or another person’s thinking. It is also a way to exercise the writing process. This, for example, makes it possible to use a "reflection protocol" in order to assess a student’s ability to think and make critical judgements. The use of "reflection protocols" may both be a good way of helping students to achieve a better and more efficient way of learning and to understand how they think and why they think as they do. It is also a way of creating knowledge, not only taking over knowledge packaged in one form or another. What kind of knowledge is it then possible to believe that the "reflection protocol" contains? Do, for example, students produce or reproduce knowledge, or a mix of both?

When you use a learning method such as the "reflection protocol", this is, of course, built up on a quite distinct view of what knowledge is. We would here like to call it a social constructive way of producing knowledge. (See, for example, Berger & Luckmann, 1979) The claim that knowledge is socially constructed is probably easiest to understand if one says we build up our knowledge of reality through language. We define concepts, which we use in order to both describe and interpret our picture of reality. If we used other concepts and stressed other kinds of relations, it would still be the same reality described and interpreted in another way. We would then have different pictures of the same reality. This is, of course, especially true when we come to our picture of social reality, but understood in quite different ways by different persons. To use a "reflection protocol" is, from what we have claimed, to construct a picture of reality.

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4 In “Swedish University Law” it is stated that the students are supposed to develop their ability to make independent and critical judgements. (Högskolelagen, SFS 1992:1434, 9 §)
What conclusions may be drawn?

It seems reasonable to think that a very structured student with a distinct opinion of what knowledge is will be very confused by writing "reflection protocols". Creative and more open-minded students, on the other hand, probably find this an exciting way to explore something about reality. Accordingly, the "reflection protocol" might be perceived in many different ways. One thing seems to be obvious: you must have a lot of knowledge about a subject to be able to make high quality reflections. What kind of feedback is it possible to give on a "reflection protocol"? From a learning perspective, the "reflection protocol" reveals what kind of thoughts students have in relation to the text read. It becomes rather like a "mind map", which might be rather frightening from the single individual’s perspective, as it is perceived as "revealing". The purpose is, of course, not for the student to be able to give "the right" answers. It is a way of understanding how different individuals perceive a given text and how a student interprets a text. This opens up for a dialogue about how different individuals interpret reality and how this interpretation corresponds with other individuals’ interpretations, so to say, a way to learn.
References


