Assessment Modes: Reflecting on Practice

Criteria

In order to demonstrate functioning at Masters level in critical reflection on practice students will:

- identify and define the chosen area of development of their practice in relation to theoretical and other contexts/frameworks/references;
- consider the nature of reflective practice;
- produce evidence of the nature and quality of personal engagement;
- give evidence of systematic and critical reflection upon and analysis of their practice, including consideration of the nature, boundaries/definitions of the activity in question and motives, causes and influences contributing to a particular development;
- demonstrate, where appropriate, the ability to synthesise and to identify new and imaginative connections;
- illuminate the development of their awareness, identity and personal philosophy through suitable methods (e.g. reflective commentary, working notebooks, sequences or work, audio/videotapes, working with a ‘critical friend’).

Introduction

This assessment mode is designed to develop your understanding of your activity as a practitioner and of the ways in which your practice relates to that of other practitioners and to your pupils/students. It is crucial to identify and explore your practice – to question what you do and why you do it. You will need to complement the insights you have gained through personal experience and working knowledge with observations gained from ‘standing back’ and taking a more analytical and critical view of what you do. Use this opportunity to open up areas of tacit knowledge and supposition, the taken-for-granted aspects of your motives, interests, ideas and methodologies. Ask yourself some of the awkward and revealing questions that shed new light on your practice, making explicit what might long have been implicit. Utilise some of the suggestions for critical evaluation contained in these notes as a means of acquiring a new critical perspective on what you do.

Reflecting on Practice

At the outset it is vital to consider what ‘Reflecting on Practice’ means and involves in the context of writing your assignment. In approaching the task you need to be clear what is meant by ‘reflection’ and ‘practice’ – neither can be taken at face value, unquestioned and undefined. Indeed the questioning and defining will be important matters that you have to address and clarify in the process of completing an assignment within this mode.
Practice

In the context of this assessment mode your ‘practice’ may be seen in terms of your activity as a teacher or educator. For the purposes of this mode you will have to define a particular aspect, or project, or period, of your practice which you are going to analyse and reflect upon.

Critical reflection

‘Reflection’ in the context of this mode has to go beyond description, anecdote or the keeping of a journal. The process has to be analytical and critical, informed by relevant theoretical thinking, formulated in such a way as to be accessible, debatable and open to questioning by others. The following headings may be helpful in identifying the different strands, which constitute the process of critical reflection. Each of these strands informs, and is informed by, the others. They are usually interdependent and interwoven, rather than sequential ‘stages’ in linear process. Some of these headings may be more applicable to your practice than others:

motives and concerns – what prompted you to undertake this particular activity, why did you do it, what was it that interested you?

aims and objectives – what did you set out to do, what did you hope to achieve?

location – where was the work done, under what circumstances?

methodology – how did you set out to do the work, what strategy did you adopt for achieving your aims, what methodology of practice and research did you employ?

processes – what generative and formative processes did you use? It will be important to describe the cognitive processes involved.

development – how did your practice develop? You may need to keep a record of your experiences, thoughts and the evolution of your ideas and processes.

product – what emerged from these processes? What form did the work take when you had completed it? For instance: it might be a written study, or a set of teaching aids for classroom use, or a design project, or a strategy for further work.

Contextualisation

Describing the contexts in which the practice was undertaken, and the contexts within which you want to evaluate it. This involves making connections between the practice you describe and other relevant ideas, fields of study, and theories. It may also be important to describe other factors which may have been determinants affecting the production of the work. It may be important to place the activity within a particular conceptual or cognitive framework, or to explain the socio-cultural, political or ideological factors, which you think, are important to any evaluation of the practice.
Critical Analysis and Interpretation

Forms of analysis and reflection will vary radically depending upon the practice being analysed. In analysing what you did you are also interpreting it, possibly in a number of different ways – possibly leading to divergent or even contradictory conclusions.

Evaluation

The many strands of this whole process of critical reflection can be brought together by evaluation. However, as with other aspects of the process you need to think about and define the rationale for your evaluation and the criteria upon which it will be based.

In doing this you need to keep in mind the 'Deep Criteria' of the IMP. Your evaluation will involve a discussion of many things. There may be few, if any ‘objective’ judgements to be made. Mostly you will be weighing-up the relative significance and value of different factors – some of which may be contradictory or impossible to harmonise. You do not need to arrive at a definitive ‘conclusion’ or summative evaluation. But it is important to be as rigorous and unbiased as you can, and to make clear all the different factors you consider relevant.

Here are some of the questions you may need to ask:

- to what extent have my interests been explored or developed?
- to what extent have I achieved my aims and objectives?
- how far have the needs or concerns which motivated me to undertake the activity been met?
- to what extent have I satisfied other criteria, such as establishing coherence and legibility, or demonstrating competence and inventiveness?
- have my research abilities and other skills been developed?
- and what of comparative judgements, how does this practice measure up against the work of others?

As you interpret and evaluate what you have done you need to establish criteria, which are appropriate to the particular activity and the relevant field of study, and you must be fair and rigorous in applying these criteria.
Process

Critical reflection has a vital role to play within practice – informing what we do as we do it – leading to greater understanding, and qualitative development. However it is important to keep in mind that reflecting upon practice is a dynamic activity involving the interaction and interweaving of two processes (reflection and practice) which may often be difficult to disentangle. The self-reflexive nature of many practices, the way in which analysis and evaluation are continually informing and re-directing what we do, may present problems in distinguishing reflection from the practice itself.

*It is the process of critical reflection, which is central to this mode not the practice itself. It is your responsibility to make sure that this is clearly the case by drawing out, describing and making explicit the critical reflection that you have undertaken.*

Reflection and the Improvement of Professional Practice

Professional development involves a continuing concern for the aspirations and consequences of practice as well as for its technical enhancement. It depends on improving the basis of which thoughtful action is constructed.

Improvement in their practice is something to which most professionals aspire. Indeed, for all the difficulties of its achievement, many would see striving for such improvement as an ever-present moral imperative. This assessment mode is intended to support teachers, whatever their role, in such endeavour. With this end in view, it is built on a number of key assumptions:

1. Improving professional practice involves enhancing capacities for thoughtful action; improvement is not merely an instrumental matter. It always involves enhancing capacities in the interests of others, whether they are children, colleagues or the wider community, and thus always has a moral component.

2. Improvement is not something that can be brought about ‘from the outside in’. It requires the active engagement of the individual professional.

3. The individual’s own practice, undertaken thoughtfully, is a legitimate and significant source of professional knowledge.

4. Critically reflecting on practice is a major way of enhancing capacities for thoughtful action, or identifying impediments to their realisation.

5. Writing and reading are major tools for reflection on practice.

6. While the active engagement of the individual in reflection on his or her practice is a key to its improvement, it does not follow that this must be a solitary activity. On the contrary, reflection may gain from the interaction of the individual’s ideas with those of others.

7. This interaction with others can be furthered through reading, writing and through talk, with others acting as critical friends.
Critical Reflection

Reflection can be critical in at least two ways. One might involve a happening that is seen to be in some way surprising or out of the ordinary, indeed so extraordinary that it brings about a shift in the way that an individual thinks about his or her practice and a resolution to change it accordingly. A second way involves taking some quite ordinary, even routine, feature of practice and holding it up for scrutiny. There is vastly more of this second kind of practice than the first, and reflecting critically on virtually any aspect of it is potentially productive. For this reason, it is likely that most people would want to undertake this second kind of venture. What makes critical reflection on practice professionally significant is the kinds of questions that are asked. Taken together, the ones that matter are those which help the questioner to view ordinary things afresh, to see their wider significance and to work out how they might be changed, if need be, for the better.

SUMMARY

With all this in mind, an assignment using the Critical Reflection on Practice assessment mode might be expected to embody some or all of the following features, each of which involves reflection, although not all of the same kind:

1. The selection of some part of the writer’s professional practice for close scrutiny.
2. An examination of the nature of reflective practice itself.
3. A careful elaboration of the significance attached to the element of practice you have chosen.
4. A careful description of this element of practice: what are the circumstances? Who is involved? What do the participants do? etc.
5. An attempt to account for why, in relation to the selected element of practice, things happen
6. A consideration of the significance of what happens to those involved, particularly with regard to its effects.
7. An exploration of the significance of what happens to those involved, particularly with regard to its value.
8. A consideration of the wider meaning of what has been focused on, in the sense of what it is typical of and how the outcomes of reflection on it may be significant to it.
9. An indication of how this relates to the public world of ideas and expectations.
10. An indication of any impediments there may be to the realisation of any aspirations for the desirable change which may stem from this reflection.
11. A self-conscious indication of shifts in the writer’s thinking which have come about through this reflection on practice.

Bibliography


**Example titles**

These are examples of titles and activities which might be appropriate within this assessment mode.

- An examination of your teaching practices in the use of ICT opportunities to enhance the teaching and learning of particular topics.
- Is the use of circle time a useful framework for the promotion of positive relationships?
- Critical reflection on the nature of my classroom relationships: what messages do I give pupils about what really matters?
- How can students’ tasks make the difference? A critical reflection on engagement of students in their learning.
- Critical reflection on the role and value of Individual Education Plans in meeting the needs of pupils with dyslexia in an inclusive setting.
- Reflect upon the range of approaches to assessment evident in your practice, and the implications of this for learners.
- What drives whole school development in your school: pupil learning or external accountability?
- A critical reflective evaluation of your assessment practice with one or more learners in practice.
- Critical reflection on the need for the virtual learning environment in contemporary education practice.
- Winter (1999) proposes the use of a ‘patchwork text’ as a vehicle for reflection-on-action. Using this model, create your own ‘patchwork text’ as a means of reflection and as a critical representation of practice.
- What do I understand by the notion of inclusive achievement? Do I plan and organise pupil assessment tasks to allow for a broad range of achievement?