This is the Weekly Reflection podcast from Saint Louis University’s Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning. Each week, we focus on a topic that fits with our theme for the 2012-2013 academic year, Engaging All Learners. Each reflection loosely follows the five-part Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation). The goal of this podcast is to provide an avenue into a space for thoughtful reflection on complex issues, rather than to provide answers to these issues.

Week 13: Reflection as a Space for Critical Thought

Context:
Professor Fiddelstein often assigns a reflection essay to her students at the end of the semester. She knows that in order to foster authentic learning, she needs to provide a space for her students to reflect about the course and what they learned in the course. This semester, however, she has decided that the assignment is just not worth it because the students do not seem to understand how to complete the assignment, and often see it as a waste of their time. Additionally, Professor Fiddelstein does not think she should grade students on their feelings, which is what students generally write about for this assignment.

Experience:
Reflection projects do not need to only be a space for students to write about their feelings; in fact, reflection can be one of the best ways for students to begin deep, critical thinking about a topic. In the “what, so what, now what” model, students begin by identifying and describing what they experienced or learned, then move into an analysis of that experience or learning by connecting it to other experiences, and by considering what is significant about what they learned both for the course as well as beyond the course. Finally, students use their analysis to begin creating an action plan or next steps for how this learning experience leads them to more or deeper learning in the future, or even how to use their knowledge in the world.

In A Practitioner’s Guide to Reflection, authors Eyler and Giles outline what they call the “four C’s of reflection” created to define the types of reflection that can lead to authentic learning and critical thinking. The four C’s are: continuous reflection, which relies on reflective thinking to be a fully integrated component of learning throughout the course; connected reflection, which links concrete and “real-world” examples with abstract, in-class learning, and/or links knowledge created in two or more courses; challenging reflection, which poses questions and ideas that are unfamiliar or even uncomfortable for consideration by the learner, explores the dissonance associated with deep learning; and, finally, contextualized reflection, which ensures activities or topics are appropriate and meaningful in relation to the experiences of the students and the material of the course.

Being intentional about choosing to create a reflection assignment that is the best way to reach a particular course of objective, and then scaffolding the reflection throughout the course so that students learn how to create meaningful, developed reflections creates a clear path toward assessable reflection assignments.
Reflection:
(Take some time to consider the following prompts. You may find it helpful to write or sketch your thoughts.)

Consider your own assumptions and beliefs about reflection. Are students expected to do any reflection for your courses? Do you teach them how to reflect critically, or do you expect that they have that skill already? What would you change about student reflection? How could you be part of that change?

Action:
For one of your classes consider at least one way critical reflection could enhance students’ ability to fulfill one of the learning objectives for the course. Choose one of the four types of reflection outlined in Experience to create a reflection assignment, being mindful of the possibilities and purposes within each option. You may find it useful to combine more than one option to create a unique reflection experience.

Evaluation:
(The following questions are meant to be used at a later time after you have completed the Action, but may be used as a way to shape the action as well. It may be helpful to write or sketch your responses.)

With what intentions did you redesign or create the learning experience? How did those intentions present in the learning experience? Did the experience change the ways you see teaching, learning or the course?

How do you know if the change made a difference in student learning? For which students did the change make the most difference? Are there negatives for any students associated with the change you made?

What will you do next?

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Thank you for participating in this week’s reflection.

The next reflection will be posted on Friday, December 7th. All reflections will be archived for future use. For more information on this week’s topic, CTTL services, programs, or events please consult the website at http://slu.edu/ctl.