A Field Guide to Responding to Reflective Writing
Or
How to Develop the Habit of Self-Critique in our Students in a Supportive Habitat

First Thoughts....It appears in practice and the literature in many guises-- reflective writing, journaling, reflection-in-practice/ reflection-on-practice. Its goals are manifold, including increasing critical consciousness, increasing empathy, fostering personal growth, developing a professional persona, enhancing professionalism, mindful practice. The ‘products’ produced appear under many names: journal entries, critical incident reports, field notes, student narratives, and, of course, reflective writing.

What the literature indicates is that one feedback loop (student self-dialogue) is not enough. There is much to be gained by having additional feedback-- from mentors and from peers. And the nature of that feedback and the environment in which it occurs does make a difference. Below are some thoughts and suggestions that we hope bring about the most success in developing the habit of self-critique in our students.

The Big Picture (in a few words) -- What/Why/How

What?

Insight Spectrum

reflexive..................................................reflective...........................................contemplative
immediate/proximate/removed/
embodiedwritten or oraltranscendent
re-actre-viewre-orient

There seems to be a relationship between reflection (insight) and outcome(s) Mann, et.al. 2007)

Why?

Socrates--“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

From a narrative standpoint-- The student (neophyte) is writing to re-member, to re-collect and shape the metamorphosing self. The mentor (experienced expert) is responding to the student’s unfolding self story, which the student tells to him or herself and to others.

How?

We believe that your approach should be infused with ardor, not rigor. Therefore, a response or conversation, is called for, not a critique. This implies an approach that is whole-hearted, or for those not as comfortable with that “organ” of emotion, perhaps “directed soul-searching” works better.

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Through comments directed to the student the responder attempts to:

encourage greater breadth to the student’s self-critique (“Good start…you might want to give some thought to x,y,z”)

encourage greater depth to the student’s self-critique (“Well said…and I’d like to know how this turns out for you after you explore it further)

Through specific or general comments, the responder shares of her or himself, reinforcing the notion that self-reflection is life-long and worth doing:

from one’s senses-- (“What I saw was..., or what I heard was....”)

from one’s feelings-- (“I was moved when I read....”)

from one’s personal practice experience the responder reveals -- (“When I read....I was reminded of the time....”)

Further thoughts

There’s a direct relationship between participation and the creation of a safe environment for sharing. Please make sure students know that confidentiality, both of written work and matters discussed in small group sessions, will be respected.

Students need to know why they are being asked to engage in this kind of work and they need to see that their work is being taken seriously (i.e. someone is reading and responding to their reflective writing.) But the individuality of students also needs to be recognized and respected. This should not be a “cookie-cutter” exercise. Not everyone is at the same level of reflection-- nor should we expect them to be. Not every one expresses him or herself in the same way, nor has the same level of felicity with the written word. (In fact, we may need to address this issue after review of our initial efforts and create other means of reflective expression, e.g. oral, visual, etc. for our students).

The principle of respecting individuality holds true for responders as well. And although your responses may be more focused (and possibly more helpful to students) if they are grounded in the rubric above, overuse of it could backfire if seen by students or experienced by faculty as formulaic.

We are aiming toward a final outcome of our students becoming practitioners who (eagerly) anticipate the surprises and struggles of practice ahead. But the more likely outcome is a willingness to at least face those surprises and struggles as they arise. Perhaps our students will also learn how and when to seek feedback when confronted with surprises and struggles-- especially from those who, most usually in silence, wrestle with the same issues-- their colleagues.