

Being a reflective learner

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Well, we're going to now move on to this idea about being reflective learners. John had mentioned earlier on today that it's very important as part of your critical thinking to be reflective, to have this metacognition, to be able to think about what you're actually thinking about. And also, we spoke about reining in some of these parameters.

Now being reflective is obviously a really important part of that, but it's also difficult, because like this whole idea of the arts, it's really easy to think, it's hard to be really objective and really stern with yourself, I guess, about where you need to develop ideas and also to love yourself when you do something really well.

So this whole idea of being reflective is equally as important in academic disciplines as well as critical thinking. So to discuss this with me, I have Steven Harrison. Welcome, Steve. And Tyrrell Golding in the studio.

Now you both have interesting backgrounds, and I'm delighted you're here, because you've run a lot of sessions about reflective learning, which I'm really looking forward to hearing more about. Steve, you're a lecturer in education. And Tyrrell, you've been doing a different sort of work before you came to the Open University doing work as a youth and community worker.

TYRRELL GOLDING: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: So thank you for coming along. We've also got some widgets that we're going to feed into the session. Those are going to be popping up very soon in your view if you're in the Watch and Engage. If you aren't in the Watch and Engage, by the way, do come in, because you can see a lot of the chat that's happening there, and also vote using these interactive widgets to tell us what you think about things.

And we would like to know, where do you do-- well, where do you note your thoughts and feelings? It's got a list of options there. What is the first thing you look at when you have an assignment returned to you? And from your last piece of assessed work, can you remember-- which of the following options-- and where are there opportunities for reflection?

I'd also just like to have a sense check just to see if things have changed in terms of which level you're studying at and also which subject. So I think most of you, around 62%, are at level one, which is great to know. So there are some here who are at levels two and three, slightly more than weeks before, which is great, because these skills often apply to those later levels, even though, obviously, it's great to get in there right from the start. So Tyrrell and Steve, tell us then about this whole idea then in terms of what is reflection, and why is it so important? Yeah.

TYRRELL GOLDING: Well, reflection, I think particularly-- we both come from practise backgrounds, so youth community work, that sort of area. So New. Practitioners, but also students first coming to study. Quite often, they think about reflection as we quite often use

the metaphor of the mirror, so reflecting in the mirror. And sometimes students will think that reflection is reflecting back to the tutor of what you've read or copying what you've seen.

But actually, the idea of reflection is to think back upon something that you've done, and that might be something quite recent, or it might be something quite long ago-- to think back on that, to start to pull it apart, to think about what it is that you did. What was the outcome? Was that the outcome you wanted? Would you do it again in the same way? But really to look at ways of developing your practise or what it is that you do.

So for students, it should be around looking at building up a skill, and just like John was talking and Jeanette talking about, being critical as something that you need to learn. The same is true for reflection. And I think quite often, we reflect back on things, but we don't think about what we would do differently, and we don't try to do something differently in a new-- so in our next TMA, for example, and that's where the students get really frustrated that reflection and being asked to constantly reflect on things is really boring and dull, and they don't know why they're being asked to do it, because they actually haven't quite completed the whole cycle.

KAREN FOLEY: I'll you what a lot of students do. They get their TMA back, and they go, that wasn't the mark I wanted. And then I'll say, what would do next time? They said, I'll get a better mark. So what would you say about this whole idea, then, about setting, I guess, realistic expectations is actually having some idea about what you're trying to do differently? How important is that in parts of the whole reflective process, especially when, like you say, TMAs can be so emotionally value laden in terms of what you get and then what you want to do?

TYRRELL GOLDING: We were talking about this earlier about the idea that sometimes a student will look at their mark and say, but I tried so hard. And it's really unfortunate, because I think people were already talking earlier about how students gain their marks. And actually, trying hard is really important, but unfortunately, that's not necessarily going to translate into your TMAs.

But I think it is about being realistic, and some of the best student feedback I see as a monitor is when ALs give really, really good feedback, but then we'll say to a student perhaps, one, two, three key things that they need to think about in order to develop their next TMA, because if you try and change everything, you're not going to necessarily know what's had the effect. Trying to get a key message from your tutor, what is the one thing I need to focus on that will help me the most? And then that's what you can do for your next TMA.

STEVEN HARRISON: There's something else to add to that as well. I'm pointing back to the example of receiving feedback on it, and I think it's a critical aspect of reflection. It's the idea of looking or reflecting through different lenses. So if you look at the TMA mark, for example, through the lens of, what does this tell me about me as a student, then I think that form of reflection will give you one way of thinking about it. So you may have a set of informal success criteria, which are your own, which say you get a 65 on a TMA. You reflect on that through the, what does this say me as a student, lens. And then you combine your informal criteria, and you come to some conclusion.

You can imagine for one student, that may be, wow. Brilliant. I'm a success. For another student, they may get the same grade and say, oh, my gosh, I'm not good enough, because

that's dependent upon the lens that they're looking through and also the criteria of the reply, I guess you could change the lens as well then. You could ask a question, rather than, what does this tell me about me as a student, you could ask the question, how can I learn from this, which is a different type of reflection, different type of lens, if you like. And it leads to a different set of reflections.

So reflection in and of itself needs to be thought of as a means for learning, a means for filtering feedback. I guess we need to think about the kind of criteria that we're applying at the same time, and if you like the metaphor for a lens, what lens we're adopting to undertake that reflection.

KAREN FOLEY: So this is all-- it's all well and good, this, in terms of having lenses and things, and I'm going to talk about how we do that, because that's what everyone wants to know, because this is such an emotive subject. I mean Joan says that if she doesn't get the mark that she wants, she just feels like packing it all in. And in terms of the widget responses that we had for students, 78% of them said that the first thing that they look at is the mark. Only 14% that they look at the overall feedback, and 7% the detailed feedback in terms of the first things they look at.

So the mark is absolutely, massively key here. So we also asked people about first thing is they're looking at the mark is key. And can they remember something positive and negative? Well, 36% the negative, and only 15% of students said that they could recall something positive from their last TMA. Now being reflective, we often associate with, like you say, what could we do differently next time, and as I guess this sort of connotation that it must be improving on things. How important is thinking about reflection in terms of both the positives and the negatives like you would talk about, I guess, this lens?

STEVEN HARRISON: This is something close to my heart, because--

KAREN FOLEY: Listen.

[LAUGHING]

STEVEN HARRISON: I've recently been a student with European University having to deal with this myself, but also, family members, my own daughter going through a degree at the moment and having to handle feedback. Again, in a lot of ways, the way in which we reflect, and the result of that reflection is based on what we are seeking from it. And if we're seeking validation or reassurance, then the tone and how we interpret that feedback is critical. I think where reflection comes in and how we mitigate that process is by suspending your initial response, and then asking questions of it.

For example, you might ask a question, is my response to this correct? Is it correct to feel that this isn't good enough or this isn't a sufficient validation of my efforts? Because in essence, I think that the Open University is, and most educational institutions adopt a feedback approach of TMAs. The feedback is there, because we believe that we are in an ongoing process of deepening our understandings, refining our subject knowledge, or refining our practise.

But this is an ongoing lifelong process. If we get-- I understand, I wholly understand the feeling of, oh, my gosh. This isn't what I wanted.

TYRRELL GOLDING: I want to hide under my duvet. Yeah. Well, we've all had-- we have allowed that feedback.

STEVEN HARRISON: But if we allow ourselves to become stuck at that point, then our chances of progression are seriously limited, so when I'm talking about lens or reflection, I guess in this instance, I would be encouraging the student to, yeah, I understand the emotion. Now can you find the space and time and opportunity? And that might be different for each to just take a different perspective, to reframe the question and see if there's other things that can be learned from it.

KAREN FOLEY: It's difficult, because like you say, we are looking at deepening understanding, but also we're looking at learning. And so then I guess on the flip side of that, there's this idea about, well, I want to be improving. I want to learn from my feedback. Therefore, my marks should be going up. I mean, Lee said, his first assignment he ever got was 100%, and his tutor said, well, it's all downhill from here, because I guess you can't go up. And there's this whole thing then, I guess, about having this numerical score, this amount of detail for something in particular, and then having all this feedback associated with it. And like you say, that number could mean different things for different people.

So what I want to explore now is how you flip this, how you reframe what you want to look at in terms of reflection. What is appropriate? You mentioned it might be different for every person. I imagine it would be very different for a lot of different people. But are there some common things that you think might be useful for students to think about as opposed to just the numerical aspect, which we must admit, I guess, is important to a large extent. What else can they think about?

TYRRELL GOLDING: I think-- well, I think Steve's absolutely right in terms of reflection being-- and all the things that we've been looking at today and discussing today being about lifelong learning skills, and it is a consistent journey. So I think it is reflecting on yourself as a student and how you deal with feedback on that just on a very personal sense. And similarly, I'm an OU student, and there has been feedback, where I literally just thought I want the ground to open me up. I've humiliated myself. I need to get my dog, hide under the duvet, and that's it.

And then fortunately, because I was in Wales at the time, by the time I drove home, I'd calmed myself down. But I'd reflected and just thought, OK, what is the purpose of this feedback for me? And the people have taken-- sometimes you're open, and you see so much feedback. You think, oh, my goodness.

But actually, if a tutor spent that long trying to give you advice and guidance on how to develop your work, actually, you've got to think that they're really invested in you as a student, that this is when students talk about quality of teaching or all the other things that people think are important in terms of education, one of the key teaching methods that tutors have is this feedback for you. And they spend a lot of time, so the mark is there to guide you as to where you are in that current TMA.

But also, it's a journey through the modules and through your study. So you've got the whole rest of the module to try and develop those skills as you progress. And then similarly, sometimes students, you'll find they go up to level two, and you struggle with some things, because there's an increase in the challenge of the material you're studying. So it is a journey.

STEVEN HARRISON: I like to use the idea of moving into new landscapes with students. And what was-- we become familiar with our own neighbourhood, if you like. As we become familiar with our neighbourhood, our ability to move around the neighbourhood becomes second nature. So we become very competent within that landscape that we're knowledgeable of.

When we engage in a journey-- actually, this is a journey no matter what, and students listening in today will be at different stages-- the idea is for, actually, we move beyond that which we're familiar with into new landscapes. And that may well be moving into the adjacent neighbourhood, or it may well be moving into a completely different landscape like moving to a different country.

And we know if we go on holiday in a different country, the signs are familiar, but the information that they carry is different, different language is used, so on and so forth. And our competence, once we're competent in our own neighbourhood, it becomes challenged in new environments. And if learning is a forward movement, it's kind of an increase in our understanding and knowledge. Then as we move into new landscapes, as we move into new terrains, it's going to become challenged.

Our competence is going to become challenged. I think that feedback, if you like, reflection is. If something jars with us, the grade isn't what we expect or the feedback isn't what we expected, it draws our eye to something to consider. It's a little bit like coming off Eurotunnel and then having to change lanes driving in whatever side, so you're trying to describe it. I'm not very good at it, but I can do it, and I have done it enough times.

So reflecting back on experience of being in a different landscape, what's changed here, a movement from level one to level two. I may be hitting 80s, 90s at level one, and then all of a sudden, I'm scrambling around in the lower 50s, lower 40s at level two. Does that mean I've unlearned something or become less competent, or does it mean that the landscape's changed and the criteria by which I'm being assessed?

Well, it is the latter. The level's gone up. The criteria has changed. I may not be fully familiar with that at the beginning of level two, but as I move through level two, I'll become increasingly familiar with the criteria by which I'm being judged, with the criteria against which the feedback's being given, and importantly, criteria against which a mark's been awarded.

And this can change within a module, between modules, and across levels. Sometimes I've heard it as being as expressed as inconsistent marking or grading, and I suspect there is a possibility of that happening sometimes, although we have very, very robust systems to mitigate against that.

But actually, within a module, I've seen a student's score high, then dip, be very upset, but then rebound amazingly once they've consolidated with two pieces of learning across those two activities. So my philosophy is grade is important, because it's important to pass, because people want to pass, and people want to pass a particular level. It's only top level feedback you need to dig in, and also we need to consider what use am I wanting to make of this? What is it I can learn? What do I want to learn?

KAREN FOLEY: That's a brilliant point. I'd like to come to you, Tyrrell, on that subject, because Jeanette says that we're back to this idea of critical analysis and thinking about, what do these comments mean? How can I look at them objectively, yet equally acknowledging? And there's a lot of sharing going on in the chat, because there is so much here that people can really relate to.

But how, then, when you're getting this TMA, and you've gone under the duvet with the dog, and then you come out again, and you think, OK, I need to make some sense of this, how do you then go about doing that in a way? And why do you think so many of our students are focusing on the negative aspects more predominately than the positive ones?

TYRRELL GOLDING: I think in terms of focusing on the negative, I think for many of us, it's probably just innately part of who we are. And I think when you're putting yourself into this new landscape, this new space, we want to be-- people are here, because they want to study, and they want to do well, so that's sort of the mark you are-- sort of reflecting how far you are from where you should be.

And I think it's quite natural to do that. For me, and I'll be brutally honest, yeah, I will check the mark first, and then sometimes I do need to go give myself some space. And as I say, I have my dog. I do a lot of reflecting on my dog, when I'm walking my dog.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, sorry.

[LAUGHING]

TYRRELL GOLDING: His behaviour, his reflection skills as a spaniel are awful. But looking at the student photos and how many-- I have a number of students I speak to on Twitter. I was talking to somebody about reflection yesterday and how many people have their dogs or cats by their side. And I think to start off, you might be writing things down, keeping some kind of journal, diary, all that kind of thing.

There are a range of models that you might get introduced to that you can follow to make sure that you're not just reflecting on how something made you feel, but you actually think about, what can I do differently? I do think time is an important thing. Give yourself space and time to think about it. And I think the student you said was Jeanette absolutely why the reflection and criticality are very interlinked, that you are looking at an issue, and you're trying to pull it apart, and you're trying to understand what's going on there and what are the processes.

And when you do that, and it's like any skill, you do have to develop it and work at it and think, how can I get better next time? I sometimes do highlighters with my feedback, and I can highlight the things that I need to act on. And sometimes when you do read that, sometimes when you're having an emotional reaction to something, you're reading it and reading it and reading it, but you're not taking it in, and that's the time when you text or you email your tutor and say, can we talk this through, because that's key.

KAREN FOLEY: And it's important to understand, I guess, if your tutor's written something that you don't understand or you think that you need more evaluation here, and you don't understand what sort of evaluation you might need to get, you could always, I guess, ask

them. We asked people earlier where they keep some of their ideas about critical thinking, and 48% in their heads, 43% on paper, 6% said friends, 3% said social media.

So quite a clear sort of mark of people putting things down on paper or in their heads. I know I keep a lot of them in my head, and then sometimes I think, oh, I must bullet point those and write them down on paper. I used to do that when I was a student. I think I'll pick up three things I'm going to do differently for my next TMA. This was when I was being well-behaved. And then I'd write them down, and then I'd put them by my next assignment, because then at least they would be transferred from one to the other. And I wouldn't be bombarded with this barrage of negativity.

TYRRELL GOLDING: Post-It notes are great. So I'm an academic at the OU, and I have its, it's, and its', because that's one of the things that I just have to think about when I'm writing to make sure I'm not using my apostrophes incorrectly. But I also put Post-It notes around when I-- these are the things I want to focus on, and these are the things I do well, so there's around my screen, there are some positive comments about these were the three things that you did really well last time that you want to try and continue.

And these are the things you want to address, because like Steve's metaphor, sometimes I use the metaphor of juggling. And you can catch a ball really well, one ball. When you add the second one, you not only drop that, but you sometimes drop the first one, because you're trying to combine those skills. So sometimes students can then focus so much on what they want to develop that they forget to make sure that they did what they did well last time as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Steve and Tyrrell, thank you so much for coming on. This has gone so, so quickly, and I know that academically, you're also developing a lot of these models here in terms of the way that people think, and there's a whole discourse behind reflection, which is really important. But our chat room have really loved this conversation.

And I think the one thing that you've really sort of both given us as well as taught us is that having that space to be able to reflect and also to be able to not be brilliant to everything, to be able to share and to learn things is so important and so valuable. And I hope that that's something that people can take away from this session. So thank you both so much for coming along.

TYRRELL GOLDING: Thank you.

STEVEN HARRISON: Thank you.

KAREN FOLEY: Ben, how is it all going? I see Annie's still--

[BUZZING]

Do you think this is a result of all this fruit? My smoothies?

BEN: I think it might be that healthy stuff you're drinking to be honest. I'm not so sure on that one.

KAREN FOLEY: I don't know. I think we should get in touch with health and safety and ask them to fumigate the premises.

BEN: We'll need to, to be fair.

KAREN FOLEY: That will teach them to send us notes.

BEN: You didn't really have this problem when there was cake everywhere and popcorn, so I think it's the healthy stuff. Lay off that, and cake is standard issue next week.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. All right. Fair enough. Cake, next week. Good plan. What are you guys talking about? And I know there's a lot of sharing going on and a lot of people feeling, I guess, some nice sense of space to be able to talk about some of these things.

BEN: Yeah, everyone really, really engaged in that session. It was really could to see. A lot of tips in terms of how to-- the best kind of way of dealing with the feedback in terms of putting aside your emotions and trying to look objectively at the feedback that you're provided to help you kind of take it on board rather than take it as a real negative criticism or anything like that.

KAREN FOLEY: How did people then do that, Ben? Have you got any advice from people about what sorts of things they're doing to actually make the most of that?

BEN: It's just bearing in mind that, actually, the tutors are here to help, and they do everything they can to make sure that you're getting the best feedback possible to help you grow as a student. And so it's really just trying to take a step back and understand that they're not doing it to dig at you. They're doing it to try and help you as a student, really. That's the key takeaway from all of this. But overall, when you do get positive comments from tutors, it's a really great thing that they've been really happy with. So yeah, lots of great stuff coming in from the chat room.

So yeah. Overall, it's looking good. The search for HJ's bag is still on.

KAREN FOLEY: Right. How is all of that going? Have they looked upstairs?

BEN: I believe they've looked upstairs, and they're walking around campus now looking for it, so they're trying to trace HJ's steps from the previous day?

KAREN FOLEY: And has HJ said why he needs it so much?

BEN: No, he hasn't, other than it may have a lot of study material in it. So he might need it for his school work. Who knows? But we're still on the case with it.

KAREN FOLEY: I hope we find it.

BEN: Yeah. I mean just have a look. Does that look familiar?

KAREN FOLEY: That does, actually.

BEN: HJ, jump on the chat room. Just let us know if this is yours. That would be really good. We'll have a look.

KAREN FOLEY: Have a rummage through it. Open it. It might have his name in it.

BEN: There's no name stitched in on it.

KAREN FOLEY: He wouldn't have stitched his name on it.

BEN: His mum may have done it.

KAREN FOLEY: Maybe.

BEN: Popcorn.

KAREN FOLEY: [GASPS] Get rid of that quick.

BEN: So what else have we got? Student planner, obviously planning his time effectively for study here.

KAREN FOLEY: Is there anything in that book, though? I bet it's blank.

BEN: There's just one thing, and that is for days of the 19th of September to go to university. So it's on plan. That's always good. It's got a nice book of quotes here.

KAREN FOLEY: Wasn't there anything in has notes about remembering his bag?

BEN: Unfortunately, not. Something for next time, maybe.

KAREN FOLEY: Clearly the problem.

BEN: And what else have we got in here? Lots of stationery.

KAREN FOLEY: It acts as stationery.

BEN: Likes it a bit too much, I think. Bit big, that one. A bit unwieldy. What else have we got?

KAREN FOLEY: Well, none of that, to be quite honest, Ben, I think is absolutely essential for going to university today. I think he's just being a meddling, you know, person and--

BEN: I think he just wants to get in, which is great, because he's stimulating a lot of chat in the chat room and really answering a lot of people's questions.

KAREN FOLEY: HJ, what is in the bag that you need, because I can't see any reason why you've taken Annie out of the studio to go looking for this bag? Actually, yeah.

BEN: I mean, there was a few other things in here that Annie's now gone off to put on eBay for us.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh. OK. Good.

BEN: But other than that.

KAREN FOLEY: [LAUGHS] HJ, you can't take things like that to university. You're a politics student. Heaven's sake. Right.

[MUSIC PLAYING]