

Appendix 2

WRITING A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Writing a reflective essay is different from writing a traditional essay. A reflective essay aims at showing how you have turned experience into learning. As such learning is emergent rather than planned and your paper needs to provide evidence of how your reflection on events and your own thinking have changed you in some way. Your reflective essay needs to show how the learning formula, $L = P + Q$, has happened for you, that you demonstrate your learning about your organization and your own thinking through a clinical approach. As Chapter 2 introduced, the clinical approach involves building theory and empirical knowledge: in-depth observation of crucial cases of learning and change, studying the effects of interventions and focusing on the characteristic of systems that are difficult to explain. This clinical approach gives focus to the learning formula, $L=P+Q$, as it sharpens the questioning of insider experience and engages that questioning with knowledge of organizational theory and behaviour so as to generate learning.

Essentially a reflective essay captures your learning from reflecting on a situation or a series of events. So it is more than simply describing what took place. Merely describing what happened does not constitute reflective thinking. Reflective thinking requires showing how you have thought about what took place and how you have thought about your thinking about it. In other words your reflective essay captures the inner and outer arcs of attention and your use of the general empirical method which takes you from experience to understanding to testing that understanding to judgement. In moving through the general empirical method the challenge is to show evidence of your learning from the searching questions that you have been asking. Use useful tools that you have learned, such as the JOHARI Window, Transactional Analysis, the Ladder of Inference, taking facts as hypotheses or the double-column technique. Be wary of making untested inferences or attributions.

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Examples of questions that may help your critical thinking are:

- What assumptions were you making at the outset? Did you challenge them and then were they confirmed or disconfirmed?
- What surprised, annoyed ... you most?
- Does your reasoning process follow the general empirical method and show how attentive you were to your experience, how your understanding is intelligent and your judgements are reasonable?
- Are there alternative explanations or conclusions other than yours? How have you considered them?
- What have you learned about yourself - how you think, how you relate?
- What might you do differently if similar situations occur?

The core source of your reflective essay is likely to be your learning journal where, in the mode of the clinical approach, you have captured the exploration of your thinking about incidents in the organization and about your thinking about your thinking. The quality of your journal keeping contributes to what you can draw on for a reflective essay, particularly if you are writing about incidents that took place some time ago. Parallel to drawing on your journal is how you draw on what you have read (the *P* of the learning formula). Your reading will have informed your understanding and challenged your thinking (the *Q* of the learning formula). Inquiring into your own thinking also provides the challenge to confront any disparity between your thinking in the past when events took place and current hindsight as you write your paper now.

While there is no standardized format for reflective essays, it is useful to have some structure so as to be able to articulate your learning so that your lecturer may be able to evaluate it. A useful format might be:

- Summarize a series of incidents - who said and did what, what you thought and felt over the series of events. What *P* are you drawing on?
- What question arises for you from those incidents? How is *P* challenged?
- What insights have you into those incidents? About the situation? About you?
- Have you tested those insights? What further reading (*P*) has helped you test them and consolidate or challenge your insights? How have you been critical of your own thinking about these events?
- What are the overall judgements that you are making after multiple experiences, insights and judgements over the time of your inquiry. What's your theory of your organization that you have verified empirically?
- Show *how* you have learned as well as *what* you have learned.