

Ep. 026: Reflection

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“Reflection” is one of those terms you read a lot about when it comes to teaching and learning. It’s also one of those concepts that sounds natural but can be surprisingly hard to apply in practice. Claire and Jim unearth examples of how it can be used, practically, in teaching, and how it can help students truly master course content. They discuss probing questions, exam wrappers, rubrics, and more-- and, of course, reflection isn’t just beneficial to students!

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today, our director, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: So, today, we are going to talk about something that we've kind of hinted at, we've used this word before. But this is going to be one of those episodes of Let's Talk Teaching where we're kind of getting down to the basic definition of something. And then I guess, talking about how we're going to use it, and the word is the password is reflection,

CLAIRE: Reflection.

JIM: What is reflection in terms of teaching and learning?

CLAIRE: You know, before I started hearing the word reflection, I was hearing the word metacognition. And I think they're related, although I don't think they're exactly the same thing. But basically, you know, metacognition is thinking about thinking, and reflection is sort of thinking about learning, it might be worth thinking about what you've learned, it might be thinking about how you've learned, um, it can also be thinking about teaching. So, it's a, it's looking back at an experience. It's we, you know, one time we've talked about before, was in connection with active learning. And there's a quote that's often credited to John Dewey, which is we don't learn through experience we learn through reflecting on experience. And D. Fink, is in this, big on this, too, you know that one of the main, the three main elements of active learning is reflection, and you have to get students thinking about the experience that they've had, and processing that in a way that helps them see that they've learned something and think about how they might use that going forward. And that piece, I think, connects to recent research that suggests that reflection can help facilitate transfer. So, taking what you've learned in one class and using it in another class or in a non-class situation. And I think probably part of the reason that reflection can help with that is that there is a piece of projecting forward, that that's included in reflection, I

think the big problem with reflection is that students don't do it naturally. Our students do not come to us as reflective thinkers, we have to teach them how to do it. And we sort of don't do that at our own peril. Because it's really easy for them if they're not being reflective, to think for example, I didn't really learn anything this semester

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: I didn't really learn anything in that class.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: So, providing students with opportunities to reflect on their own learning along the way, while a class is in process can actually raise their awareness of their own learning, and that that is always to our benefit.

JIM: And that, and that makes a lot of sense to me, because there is that it is a very true effect. They call it the primacy, recency effect, you remember the first thing, and you remember the most recent thing. And, you know, I mean that my daily life is full of that. Like, I remember, the first thing I did this morning, and then I remember what I just did five minutes ago, and everything else in the middle can be a blur, unless I really sit down and think about, and there's and it's harder to do, and it's less accurate. So, I can understand why from when we talk about reflection and students reflecting on their learning, giving it to them in those little digestible bits.

CLAIRE: Yes, frequency.

JIM: Frequency is, is an important characteristic. Okay, so let's pause for a second because we've, we've talked, we have been defining reflection a lot in terms of the word reflection, we've been using that to define it so. So, at reflecting upon our conversation thus far. So, can you give me an example of when you've used a, an exercise in class that has dealt with reflection, just so we can kind of get a little bit maybe for folks listening to, in their mind a little more concrete idea of what we're talking about.

CLAIRE: Sure, reflection is a huge part of every writing class I teach. But I talk about writing classes a lot. And that's kind of, so I'm going to talk about something else today. Okay, well, you're writing teacher so you know, I'm a writing teacher, right? So, but I'm also a teacher of writing teachers, a teacher of writing teachers, there you go. So, in my methods classes, okay, when I when I have taught, teaching, writing in the secondary schools, I often use reflection, and I use it in this way. When I was first assigned to teach that class, I was told oh, and by the way, there are some clinical observation hours connected to this class, sort of linked to this class. So, the students taking this class also have to complete a certain number of clinical observation hours in in schools, and I was like, okay, whatever, that's a, that's some college bed requirement. I really don't care about it, they can go out and do it, you know? And I didn't. Well, okay, so I was pretty dumb about that. I didn't reflect on how that might help my students learn. But I but I learned pretty quickly that I'm not connecting what we were doing in the classroom. And what they were seeing in the in the schools was, was really dumb. Because they weren't making connections between what we were doing in the

classroom, and what they were seeing in the schools. So, I very quickly, I think, the probably the second time I taught the course, I developed an assignment, a reflection assignment that asks students to follow up their classroom observation in the schools with a reflection. And in the reflection, they needed to tell me three things. What, what did you see? So, just a very brief description of what they saw. So, what, why is it important? And it specifically I asked them to think about, how does this connect to what we've been talking about in this class, and what you've been learning in this class? And then, now what? So, now that you've seen this, and you've thought about how it connects to what you've been learning in this class, what does that suggest for your future practice as a teacher? What would you like to see happen in your classroom and why? So, that kind of pulled those two disparate pieces of the chorus together that the outside of the classroom part and the inside of the classroom part. And I love that you use the word pulled together that phrase pull together? Because when I when I think of students working with questions, phrase, the way you just phrase them, the learning almost becomes seductive. There, there is no way that you cannot think about those questions without really thinking about them. There's, there's no textbook answer to remember, those are very higher-level questions in you know, if you want to put it on Bloom's Taxonomy, they're up there. Right.

JIM: And, and so and those are, but they those questions would not make sense, if there had not been that situation first, that they have to reflect upon.

CLAIRE: Right. They can do the same thing with a reading, right. So, you know, they can do the same thing with pretty much any learning experience that they're having. That's why in my writing classes at the end of every unit, where, you know, they submit their paper, and the next thing they do is they sit down, and they write a reflection about the process of writing the paper they just wrote. And so, they, you know, they talk about, you know, the process they went through, what did they learn from the process? What did they learn about themselves as writers, what do they want to remember for the future? So, basically, the same kinds of, of thinking, but they're doing it, they're doing it pretty often during the course.

JIM: So, and we're going to, we're going to probably go all over the place in this episode.

CLAIRE: Sounds like it.

JIM: But that's, but that's okay. Because, because one of the questions I have that just came to mind is, so what kind of feedback do you give them upon their reflection? Because I can see someone being hesitant to say, your reflection is wrong? Because it's your reflection? Yes, your reflective thoughts. So...

CLAIRE: Right. And so, it's not a matter of right or wrong, it's a matter of sort of mature or not mature. I mean, I guess there's some element of right or wrong. So, so, I developed a rubric for my reflection, okay, this for the students reflections, I thought about what I wanted to see, you know, I thought about what the various possibilities were. So, I thought about my, my criteria, and I thought about my standards, and I wrote it all down in the form of a rubric. And basically, you know, and I broke it into those three parts, the sort of what, so what now, what part? And basically, it was, well, you know,

did you give me, did you describe what you saw in the classroom? Was it and then I sort of I built that out was it? You know, so, an A might be a vivid description, you know, I can see this I feel like I'm there, you know, but also concise? I don't know if those two are, they may be somewhat each other. But, you know, and maybe, maybe not. And, and then, you know, the part about, you know, connecting it to the classroom was, you know, were you able to identify specific topics that we've been addressing in the classroom, and did you make clear connections and, you know, do the connections hold true, you know, is, you know, just, you're just picking something we learned and say, well, it applied to that to what I saw, you know, you're actually sort of making an argument and saying, you know, here are these things that are connected the moving ahead part, that's a little that's a little mushy ear, it's all a little mushy, right?

JIM: Yeah. But yeah.

CLAIRE: At least with the rubric, I could and I don't have it in front of me. So, I can't remember what any of it said. But it sort of gave them an idea of the kinds of things that I was expecting that they would do to share their reflections.

JIM: Sure. So, I've, I've am in the midst of doing something, and it's actually due Friday. My students are actually they've done they've done a, a project, a podcast project, ironically enough, or appropriately enough.

CLAIRE: That's very meta.

JIM: Yeah, no, no. Isn't it though?

CLAIRE: Podcast about your podcast?

JIM: Yeah. That's true. I do it. First of all, I should probably say I don't make them listen to my podcast. I'm not one of those instructors that just shows off my own stuff. So, I don't I don't force that they're aware it exists. But I don't know if anyone's any of them have actually heard it. Anyway. So, they've done this podcast exercise, and it brings in a couple of different elements, they had to work in groups on it, because the podcast one is boring. And one of the learning objectives for this is not just to practice their voice and to practice interviewing, or how whatever the format of the podcast is, but it's also to appreciate that professionals or people who who are really good at doing podcasts make it look easy. And there's a there's a time commitment involved in any performance. And so, I've, I've kind of taken, it's a form of reflection, I think, because I've taken it and it's from Elizabeth Barkleys, Student Engagement Techniques.

CLAIRE: Okay, yep, yeah.

JIM: And it's essentially an exam wrapper or, but it's, but it's for the assignment. And so, they are taking an online quiz. But it's more of a survey. There's no, no points associated with it. How much time did you spend working on this? Now that you've gone back and listened to it, do you feel like that that was enough time? What was the easiest thing about it? What was the hardest thing about it? So, what my intention is, is that next Tuesday, I'm going to take these answers and aggregate them and kind of

give them a sense anonymous, of course, of where the class was his project, and hopefully to generate discussion. I don't know if I don't what I don't have built in right now is what you were talking about. The most mushiest.

CLAIRE: Mushiest.

JIM: Mushiest?

CLAIRE: How will this change your practice?

JIM: Yeah, how? Yeah. And maybe that it maybe I just kind of leave that hanging in let them and let them dwell on that.

CLAIRE: Yeah. you may, you know, or you can ask them that.

JIM: Ask them? Yeah.

CLAIRE: You know, I mean, you can, one thing that you can do in that part is, is have people set some goals. So, you know, the next time I do a podcast I yeah, I would like to...

JIM: Or for our third video performance assignment.

CLAIRE: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. But you know, I'm interested that you mentioned the exam wrapper, because that's a really different kind of reflective activity, but it's absolutely a reflective activity.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: You know, it's, it's, um, it's much less narrative and more sort of survey ish as you mentioned.

JIM: Yeah, yeah.

CLAIRE: But but it's still it does. It does engage students in reflective practice. And I think that's, that's really important. And I'm so I'm so happy. You mentioned that.

JIM: I kind of hit upon that. And one reason why I did was, and you know, you and I are both narrative people we both teach writing are different forms of writing, or communication, or English or whatever.

CLAIRE: And we like podcasts.

JIM: And we like podcasts. And we like essays.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Seriously. So, so we in one reason why I went to this is because I knew I had to have some sort of self-reflection, I didn't want them listening to each other's podcasts yet. And I needed to have some sort of reflection or self-reflexive, if I'm using the word correctly, element to it. But I got some significant eye rolls when I started it. And by

the way, this I should, I should step back, this was an assignment. First time I've ever done this, this entire assignment was one that we designed as a class together.

CLAIRE: Oh, cool.

JIM: Because I used to have them do talk shows, and there's no way to do a serious, it's all acting, and it's all a mock talk show. It's just, we're not in a studio, even for this exercise. So, having them go off on their own and record with their smartphones or whatever devices, you can record a podcast, as we're kind of proving right now. You can record a podcast fairly easily. Here in studio Gee.

CLAIRE: You know how the sausage is made? Right? We work so hard on these.

JIM: So, in when I kind of said, well, we have to have some sort of analysis bit of this. So, you know, you could write a little short essay, and of course, yeah, and they're kind of set because I have admittedly had it, have them do it. They've done much more writing. I think it's good for him, much more writing than they expected to in a class called broadcast performance. They've been doing a lot of performing too. Don't get me wrong, you know. So, anyway, so that was a little side note on on this whole idea of reflection, but I was I was motivated specifically by trying to find a reflection opportunity for them that wasn't as narrative driven.

CLAIRE: It didn't result in a narrative. Yeah.

JIM: Yeah. You know, one other method of it's sort of like reflection, I guess, is having students write questions for each other based on a reading or based on an assignment. I guess the reflection may come later. They may I guess, it depends on the quality of the questions, or the tenor of the questions.

CLAIRE: Yeah, what kind of questions they're really asking because you know, They, sometimes when you have them, do they that they default to really surface level

JIM: knowledge level stuff? You know, on page 12? What are the four things?

CLAIRE: Yes. You know, what were the three causes of the Civil War mentioned in this reading? Yeah, no. And that's, that's not very reflective, right. But you probably could, you know, think about Bloom. And you could probably crank that up a few notches and end up with something more engaging. But, you know, I think there would be value in having students think about their reading process.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: You know, yeah, I don't know. That's a really, that's an interesting question. I have to think about that.

JIM: Yeah. Well, and maybe that goes back to the exam wrapper idea to, you know, if you're testing on the reading, if you if that's how you've set up your course, that that would be something to, to look into. So, in terms of reflection, when we're talking about this concept of reflection, we've got some good examples there now. And it

seems like, can you have too much reflection? In your course? Is there a, is there a danger to where you're talking too much about the process? And not enough about the discipline?

CLAIRE: No, I don't I don't think so. I mean, because they're always reflecting on learning, right? They're always reflecting on something, right. So, it's not like I mean, I, you could have people reflect on reflections and act, you know, in a writing class, you actually kind of do that. At the end, they pull all their little reflections together and do a big reflection, but there has to be something there. So, there have to have been ideas and information explored, right. And opportunities provided experiences created before, so that they're reflecting on something right. So, I would recommend having students reflect fairly regularly, you know, so even the idea of a one-minute paper or a muddiest point.

JIM: Okay.

CLAIRE: At the end of class You know, so where you're thinking that you're like, maybe looking at the notes that you took, you're thinking back to the to the previous 48 minutes, and, or 73. And asking yourself, what was there that I didn't get? You know, that's going to be the muddiest point. What was the thing that I understood best today? You know, what was the thing that I really struggled with it, you know, then you're getting more into a one-minute paper. But, yeah, so that a lot of people use that. And that's, that's, that's a kind of reflection.

JIM: Yes, so, it seems to me that when we're when we're defining reflection in terms of teaching that one of the critical criteria is that it's more than just a summary. It has to have some relatable, there has to be some something that the student either finds resonance with, or applies it, there's has to be some application of the information. It's not just, what did we learn today, it's not just like, if you even if you're even if you're taking immaculate Cornell style notes, where you are summarizing information as you go along, and then at the bottom, you have that space for summarizing everything on this page. That's not reflection, that's a different kind of...

CLAIRE: Summary. Summary, that's just you know, that's, that's not that's a, it's a different genre, it's a different kind of thinking.

JIM: But I also think that summarizing may actually, into some extent, be the first step in the process of reflection, right? That sometimes it's helpful, you know, okay, talks about what you did.

CLAIRE: What do I need to think about?

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: Now I need to think about these other parts of that.

JIM: Or that might be a way to kind of tease out that that sort of muddled, forward-looking aspect of it, you know, get the reflection is where do you go the prompt for the reflection?

CLAIRE: And, you know, reflection isn't just for students.

JIM: I see what you did there,

CLAIRE: You see what I did there. Yeah. So, um, when I'm, when I'm teaching, teaching, when I'm facilitating the, the design your course workshop, one of the things we talk about is finding a way to integrate into your course some opportunities for you to reflect on how the course is going. And I always suggest that people do this in writing so that the next time they teach the course they have a record of their thinking, as they were going along. Some people call this a teaching journal. That's a pretty that's a kind of a formal way of doing it. I usually when I'm doing it, I always have kind of a, a plan for the class. And it's usually, you know, it's usually on a piece of paper. And so, I just leave a space at the bottom for me to make some notes for myself. Now, sometimes those notes are not reflection, right. Sometimes those notes are just, you know,

JIM: Technical details.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: Procedural details.

CLAIRE: Right. Yeah, um, leave more time for this activity, right? But I can push that to reflection. And I can write about why I need to leave more time for the activity. What it was that I think maybe didn't go as I had planned and what might have caused that and what I might do differently next time. So, I'm really engaging in thinking about my teaching in a way that can help me emerge from that experience as a better teacher. So, you know, this is these goes back to the idea of reflective practice of the reflective practitioner. And so that, you know, we, we really want to encourage people in any field to be reflective practitioners to take the time to think about their practice, and how they're going to maybe make modifications to that moving forward, right, and why,

JIM: and why. And of course, it's important, you know, there's value, perhaps, especially for teachers, there's value in thinking about why something went well? Yeah. It's not just when things go wrong, you know, we often I think, is true in most in most professions, we don't usually hear a lot of feedback when things go well.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: When there's an issue, there's a problem, or when we feel like it just wasn't clicking that day in class.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: And that's those are perfectly valid times to ask why? Why do I think that happened?

CLAIRE: Why do I think it was just happenstance was that luck with a blind luck? I had a student tell me one time, she was a great, she was an up, she was a great student. She said, the problem with getting A's is that you don't get any feedback. And I said...

JIM: That's interesting.

CLAIRE: Really, that's interesting. And she said, yeah, people just write A's on my paper, and they give it back to me. And I don't know why I got an A.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And I was like, okay, well, thank you very much for, you know, doubling my workload.

JIM: And that's what I feel like, but I can relate to that statement. And, and when I give feedback, I try. And there's no, there's no official number. But when we talked about in a previous episode about rubrics a little bit we did today, too, but and how we always leave space in our rubrics for those open comments. And in my template I have I put in a couple bullet points that are blank, because I really challenged myself that no matter what, how they scored on it, that I'm going to provide at least three or four points of feedback. Yeah. And sometimes I will admit, they're a bit good job. You know, which is good, but not, not meaningful.

CLAIRE: Not helpful.

JIM: Right. But, but other things like you know, you are, the argument you made was very well structured. I, you, you did a good job.

CLAIRE: Just pointing out the things they did well.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: It's really interesting, because you know, I have these, as you have heard all the time about my grandsons. One thing about having four preschool aged grandsons is that a lot of things catch my eye about child rearing and

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: You know, I'm learning a lot about what I did wrong, decades ago.

JIM: Reflecting upon your parenting.

CLAIRE: Reflecting upon my parenting in order to improve my grandparenting. But one of the things that I see every once in a while, is an article about why you shouldn't just say to a kid, good job, or nice work.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: That you should be very specific and say, wow, you found exactly the right piece to put in that space, that hole in the puzzle that was, you know, that took some thinking on your part. So, being more specific, even when they've done something well.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Pointing out to them what it was that they did well, and I think I think college students can benefit from that as well.

JIM: Claire, thank you so much for joining us again today.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about our podcast by going to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. You can also email us your ideas for a topic for Let's Talk Teaching, send it to CTLT@ilstu.edu. For Dr. Claire Lamonica and everyone here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. Until we talk again, Happy Teaching!