# Evolving Reflective Practice: Unstructured, Structured, and Computer-Mediated Debriefing

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**Abstract**

This poster describes an incremental approach to developing reflective practice in LIS students anchored in three different types of assignment debriefing incorporated into a regularly taught elective course on user instruction. An overview of these three reflective techniques illuminates tensions in reflective practice and suggests how each technique might fit into a programme of building reflective practice for future LIS practitioners. In particular, it shows how student and teacher reflection work together to inform each other, evolving practice for the learner and educator.

**Keywords:** reflection, pedagogy, debriefing, e-learning, practice

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## 1    Introduction

Reflection is a fundamental aspect of learning from experience, and reflective thought is essential to the improvement of both teaching and learning. Reflective practice is a term coined by Donald Schön in his important text *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). Practitioners often know more about what they are doing than they can articulate. In fact, much of the work of effective practitioners becomes tacit over time. However, to maintain professional growth, as well as to document the contributions of effective practice in society, it is critical that we develop a culture of active reflection among LIS practitioners. Schön's early articulation suggested that much of what happens in graduate school is of little value compared to workplace professional development. However, in later work (1987) he suggests that reflection can be cultivated and bridging activities can prepare students for effective practice through structured debriefing. Newer research further suggests that we can employ teacher-designed technologies to facilitate reflection, and build reflective patterns that students can emulate long after they depart university for the working world (Laurillard, 2012).

While Schön is credited with originating this specific term and its definition, we see the roots of reflective practice in much earlier writing, specifically in the works of the philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey (1933; 1938). Reflective practice is commonly linked with the ongoing development of professional skills, but can be applied to many fields of human endeavour in which people strive to improve. In Dewey's conceptualization, reflection combines experiences or events with prior experiences, thoughts and emotional reactions in a process of lifelong learning. Reflection is key to continuity, to human growth and development, and helps the learner to avoid miseducative experiences: those that undermine our ability to engage in future learning.

While the process of reflection is considered of vital importance, as teachers we often find it difficult to fit into our overloaded curricula. Furthermore, for many students who are new to a domain, reflection is uncomfortable: it exposes the weaknesses in their developing conception of self as a practitioner and highlights their role as novices. Students in the author's courses report that reflective assignments are rarely prescribed in formal education, in their prior LIS courses or in their undergraduate experiences. The research on professional education (e.g., Loughran, 1996; Lyons, 2010) supports this anecdotal evidence. Yet, without

effective guidance, practice, and motivation, reflection is not likely to become a regular part of a practitioner's routine. One of the most direct approaches to building reflective practice is the assignment debrief, whereby students reflect on their work or performance and identify strengths and opportunities for improvement, either as a conversation in class or in a written essay submitted to the instructor.

## 2   Method and Data Source

This paper will document three different debriefing techniques employed with a student performance-based assignment, showing an evolution in the author's approach to reflective practice. In the author's user instruction course, students are assigned to develop and present a 10-12 minute lesson related to an LIS topic and specific to a context of their choosing. Students present on a variety of topics, ranging from teaching parents how to select appropriate books for a toddler, to teaching seniors how to access government services online. Their lessons are video recorded and a copy of the video file is provided to each student to support their reflection within three days of the in-class performance. Three different debriefing techniques were employed to prompt and mediate student reflection on their teaching with different classes of students in sequential academic terms (16-23 students per class).

Briefly, these three conditions were:

- Unstructured debrief: Students were simply prompted to "reflect" on their teaching performance without detailed instructions on what to include, beyond a suggested length (300 words) and basic formatting criteria. Essays were to be submitted within one week of receiving the video.
- Structured debrief: Students were prompted to engage in structured debriefing of their teaching performance using a 6-step technique adapted from Gibbs (1988). The length of the essay and formatting were identical to the first reflective condition.
- Computer-mediated debrief: Students' videos were uploaded to an online tool called the Collaborative Lecture Annotation System (CLAS), an environment which allows the user to view and annotate the video, in lieu of writing a separate reflection document. There were no length requirements for students' annotations.

## 3   Findings

Each of these conditions prompted different types of student reflection. Unstructured debriefs were, overall, emotionally rich but more negative regarding student self-assessment. Structured debriefs provided a balance of positive and negative assessment, but often lacked reference to specific details of students' teaching technique. The CLAS system focused student attention on specific aspects of their performance, while losing some of the broader, synthesizing statements evident in the other two debriefing conditions. These techniques will be illustrated in the poster with examples from students' reflective writing and annotation, used with their permission. The author will also identify some of the tensions around these techniques, including time and effort to prepare for student reflection. Many students' initial resistance to participating in reflective activity was balance by their subsequent assessment of the activity as valuable.

## 4   Conclusions

This poster presents an overview of these three reflective techniques and suggests how each might fit into a programme of building reflective practice for future LIS practitioners. In particular, it shows how student and teacher reflection works together to inform each other, evolving practice for the learner and educator. This work relates to the conference theme of "breaking down walls" though its innovative use of new technologies and its dedication to overcoming barriers to reflective practice. It presses faculty in LIS to ask: How can we best educate practitioners to remain vital and effective contributors to society by promoting a culture of reflection?

## 5    References

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