



Teaching and Learning Services - Teachers on Teaching  
**Reflection and Teaching**

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# Metacognition and Reflection: The Dilemma

Successful metacognitive strategies such as formative assessment also teach “schmootz” : learning to satisfy a payoff structure that results in pattern-following, but not mental agency or reflection.

This reifies or operationalizes thinking and it encourages projective identification with instructor rather than supporting genuine interest in subject matter.

(cf. Weiser, Nietzsche)

# Reflection, Agency, Identity

**Reflective thinking arises from perplexity; from the felt demand for a solution. Insofar as the reflective agent can account for why she is striving to know and how she is “making knowledge,” she is giving an account of herself, of her personal identity (paraphrasing Dewey).**

- ❖ **So: what is the best way to frame the dilemmas that motivate our disciplines or methodologies, with an eye toward supporting the agency of those who work through those dilemmas?**

**A *self* may be nothing more than a set of relationships. But not having access to oneself is the greatest form of despair. Conflicts with oneself are key relationships. Willing or having mental agency *is* just relating to oneself (paraphrasing Kierkegaard).**

- ❖ **So: if the self (identify, agency) is forged in relationships, including or foremost to itself (reflection), how can we support such relating?**

Identity as loci of practices, commitments; Cf. “intersectionality” (Crenshaw)

(cf. Barnett, Yancy, Plato, Aristotle)

# Reflect on what?

**Reasoned inferences are the result of the regulation of the conditions under which observation and inference take place. Reflective inquiry asks:**

- Which types of suggestions are we willing to entertain; ***what counts as evidential***; when is information trivial and when is it fundamental?
- ❖ **So: how can we encourage the study of conditions (of study itself, of our subject matter in particular, of classroom success)?**

E.g., civility, principle of interpretative generosity, access to shared language, preexisting expertise, acceptance of certain forms of authority (and which practices, issues disrupt those conditions).

Proust)

(cf., Aristotle, Kant, Dewey,

# Guiding Questions

- ❖ **What is the best way to frame the underlying dilemmas that motivate our disciplines or methodologies?**
- ❖ **How can we support the development of mental agency (identity, selfhood) through staging opportunities to relate to and reflect upon one's developing identity and agency?**
- ❖ **How can we facilitate the study of the conditions of inquiry, its context, and its categories or best types?**

# Three Interlocking Modes

Reflective teaching and learning as an agency/  
identity-fostering practice includes:

- 1) Narrative
- 2) Signification
- 3) Disappointment or surprise

# 1. Narrative and Reflection

The origin of consciousness remains a mystery as does much about its functioning, but *my* consciousness, recognizable to me as my own, responds to narration.

E.g., Platonic dialogues. What is the scene of inquiry? Who fails to understand something and why do they fail? How do we relate to the narrated scene?

# Utilizing narrative

Narratives can translate between senses, media, contexts. Reflection, and the personality who identifies with a given reflective sight, is strengthened by practices of translation.

➤ This is translational, polyvocal, multimedia narrativity.

## **Translational activities**

E.g., From problem-solving to journal reflection; from formula to informal, ordinary language description; from lecture to short video; from written argument to visual pun (or meme); from poetic form to proof. All represent key cognitive ability to *review* and to *present* findings to others.

Transfer of one kind of knowing-how to another supports understanding of knowing-why; identifying relationships or patterns across media as well as senses.

(Cf. Plato, Kierkegaard, Herder, Hegel)



# Visual narrations (examples)

ASL resource:

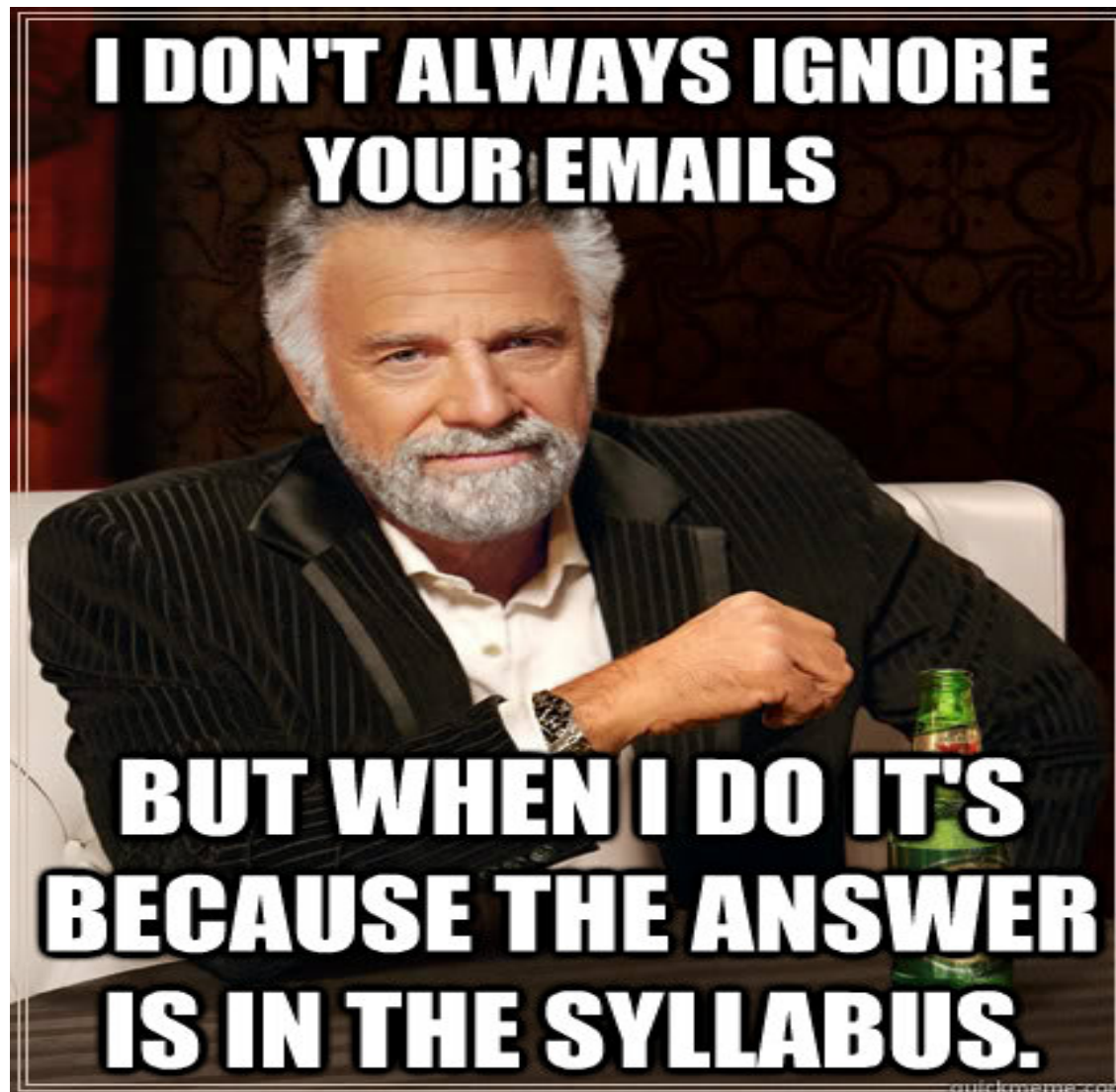
“Aesthetics”

<http://aslphilosophyresource.com/aesthetics/>

“Abduction”

<http://aslphilosophyresource.com/abduction/>

# Neglected syllabus narrative meme



# Utilizing narrative in class

- Class dialogue: e.g., with professor: From the outset, ask students what they know and desire to know and what they expect to get out of class (positive and negative)
    - with peers: God debates, class technology policy
  - Thought experiments (encourage movement from concrete to general and back again, e.g. Singer's drowning child)
  - [Assignments: Journals that include reflective practices such as setting and assessing goals
    - ✎ Professors should respond to these reflections and should include these and other reflective practices in assessment, but in a way geared to downsize "schmootz"
      - organizational chart or "mental map";  
List of elements for a "Theory of X" – education, ethics, law, etc.
- cf. Yancy's "GPS": mostly students don't "fully arrive" at a finished theory, they reflect on what such a position would have to provide and become interested in finding it. ]

# Utilizing narrative

## **Narrative allows for:**

The posing of models or regulative ideals (positive and negative).

Ethos of criticality, charitable interpretation (etc.) to be opened to discussion.

The polyvocal authorization of appropriate ways of being; authority is diffused and agreement can be considered.

When classroom conflicts arise, narrative provides structure of reference (culture).

Students who are encouraged to reflect narratively on the scene of their own learning are practicing key cognitive movements from particular to general; they are considering what should count as evidential; they are interpreting their own earlier pronouncements and the assertions of others; and they are beginning to identify lines of convergence in their more closely held beliefs.

## 2. Signification and Reflection

Signifying is a way of marking one thing as evidential for another thing, as dark clouds might signify imminent rain. Reflectively signifying is always a matter of weighing “what counts” as evidence.

Effective metacognition and reflection entail the ability to attribute mental states to others and oneself. We must represent or signify those states in order to reflect on them, and serious reflection must take into account *how* we signify those states.

(Cf. Aristotle, Hume, Dewey, Polanyi, Blake Yancey)

# Signification and Reflection

Signification allows for our notice of consistencies and the doubt that arises when they fail to hold.

✎ Making the conditions of signification a matter of joint inquiry and shared narratives is ideal. We all (always) operate within certain institutions and norms, and these condition our interactions in fundamental, though often unnoticed ways.

Consider how certain technologies, languages, behaviors, ways of appearing (etc.) condition the material we teach and learn.

(Cf. Herder, Peirce, Miller)

# 3. Disappointment / Surprise

Reflective thinkers have the stamina to keep inquiring in the face of the unknown, rather than to settle for the first available solution. So reflective thinkers are rationally confident or optimistic. (Aristotle: Thinking is not an isolated faculty ; it is open reflection on a goal. )

--Yet--

The literature on metacognition shows that the worst performers and worst metacognizers seriously inflate their abilities. They do not study enough, request help, or in general apply themselves either because they have not yet considered their level of expertise at all or because they are overconfident.

As such, cultivating self-awareness and efficacy entails setting the scene for the loss of this fictional proficiency – making problems for the identity that has not yet been forged in reflective practice.

# Cultivating disappointment

**This puts into practice a Socratic model of self-inquiry within a community of interested interlocutors. (And they killed Socrates.)**

Becoming disappointed, surprised, or un-entitled can be upsetting.

**We want to allow students to experience, in the culture of inquiry, the personal intellectual resources that survive (or arise with) the destruction of particular beliefs.**

How to make students partners or discussants in judging educational experience not only in terms of immediate results but from the more difficult standpoint of developing personal habits, attitudes, identities?



# Cultivating disappointment

For example,

- View disappointed characters and how they cope or fail to cope (e.g., Platonic dialogues, historical figures).
- Thematize intellectual conflict as the scene of development (e.g., ethical decisions).
- Build classes around a set of explicit key issues or question so that students can both work through them and experience a sequential (historical or otherwise) series of others' work on these same ideas (what counts as evidence?).

Coping with disappointment, like every teaching-learning experience, is set into a psychodynamic, interpersonal framework. Our teaching disappointments are occasions to 1) suspect conclusions while actively pursuing inquiry; to attend to conditions/context of learning environment; and 3) to continue developing identities as educators, able to regain our orientation when something throws us off.

# Oblique References\*

## Canonical Texts\*

- Plato *The Symposium, Republic* etc.
- Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* etc.
- David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature*
- Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* etc.
- JG Herder *A Treatise on the Origin of Language*
- GWF Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*
- Friedrich Nietzsche *Untimely Meditations* etc.
- Søren Kierkegaard *The Sickness Unto Death* etc.
- Charles Sanders Peirce *Principles of Philosophy*
- John Dewey *How We Think*
- Hilary Putnam “The Meaning of Meaning”

## Recent Scholarship

- Joëlle Proust “Epistemic Agency and Metacognition: An Externalist View” (Proceedings of Aristotelian Society, 2008) etc.
- Asher Koriati “The Feeling of Knowing: Some Metatheoretical Implications for Consciousness and Control” (Consciousness and Cognition 9, 2000)
- James M. Lang *Cheating Lessons* (HUP 2013)
- Irwin Weiser “Revising Our Practices: How Portfolios Help Teachers Learn” (*Situating Portfolios*, 1997)
- Julie Jung “Reflective Writing’s Synecdochic Imperative: Process Descriptions Redefined” (College English 73, 6, 2011)
- Kathleen Blake Yancy “Reflection” (*Keywords in Writing Studies* U Colorado 2015) etc.
- Sharon Pianko “Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process” (College Composition and Communication 30, 1979)
- Michael Polanyi *Knowing and Being* (Chicago UP 1969)
- Randy E. Barnett “The Virtues of Redundancy in Legal Thought” (Cleveland State Law review, 1990)
- John William Miller *The Task of Criticism* (WW Norton 2005) etc.

### On the relationship between narration and personal identity

Narrativists: Marya Schechtman *Staying Alive* (OUP 2014) etc.

David Chalmers *The Conscious Mind* (OUP 1997) etc.

Non-narrativists: Galen Strawson *Selves* (OUP 2011) etc.

\* Here are listed works referred to in general terms during the presentation. This does not imply an exhaustive or even an adequate listing of key texts.

\* The first column is chronological and the second exhibits no meaningful sequence.

# Appendix I:

## Signification and Reflection

To utilize signifying practices reflectively, we encourage thinking about what counts as evidence and why it counts.

Traditionally effective practices of formative assessment:

- should be regular and consistent (low-stakes questions repeated in high-stakes questions);
- should encourage “pauses and rescannings” in which mental agency develops;
- should be recognized (by professor and students) as non-trivial.

Our reliance on signification is best supported by maintaining consistent expectations/responses in terms of conduct, while sustaining conditions for uncertainty, unpredictability, even anxiety.

Yet in order to move beyond “schmootz” or reification, formative self-assessment practices should be balanced by direct challenges to belief and demands to account for beliefs with reasons.

# Appendix I ct.

## Utilizing signification in class

E.g.,

- (Class technology policy, as mentioned)
- Student study of literature on student evaluations
- Testimonials of previous successful students incorporated in class materials
- Singer's arguments about animal welfare and charitable giving (as mentioned); Dershowitz's arguments about legalizing torture, etc.: insofar as these may disabuse us of the ethical principles we thought we upheld, and may force either a change in viewpoints or in behavior
- Mental maps, i.e., organizational charts, lists for theoretical models, sample/ideal first sentences: activities that help students imagine what a finished product or working system must entail.

# Appendix II: Cultivating disappointment

## Responding to classroom problems:

- The professor is responsible for maintaining the conditions of inquiry, to the greatest degree s/he can manage. This will entail ensuring access to materials, keeping the environment free of unnecessary distractions, and requiring civility.
- The professor is modeling and culture-creating for the whole class as she is responding to any individual or smaller group. I find it helpful to observe this modeling even as I must respond to any one individual. We can:
  - Know as many names as possible, using picture-roster whenever necessary, and question people directly.
  - Bring problem students in for one-on-one discussion.
  - Acknowledge bids for recognition, on our terms.
  - Respond to criticisms as reflections and invite students to discuss them in this way.

The structuring narrative and signifying, condition-noticing models we use in class can be constructed to help circumvent typically problematic behaviors and to identify them, with student input, when they arise. Whenever possible, challenges can be treated as the kinds of conflicts we encounter as we start noticing the conditions for some individual's ability to learn (e.g., suspicion of authority, problems with time management). Once so identified with input from the student, they might be utilized or dispelled.

(Cf. Plato, Hegel)