Reflection for Music Students

Effective Learning Service
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
els@rcs.ac.uk
**Reflection for Music Students**

**What is reflection?**

All human beings learn from experience and reflection is a part of this natural learning process. Kolb has described this very succinctly in his model of experiential learning.


Here is an everyday example of experiential learning.

Imagine you always travel to the Conservatoire with the 8.35am bus. When you miss the bus the first day, you might think it was just bad luck, but when you arrive at the bus stop at 8.32 for the third time just to see it leave from afar (1. Concrete experience), you will start to wonder why this happened (2. Observation and reflection). Maybe the timetable changed (3. Forming an abstract concept)? You could test this concept (4.) by checking the timetable or by arriving at the bus stop earlier. If it turns out that the bus is indeed leaving at 8.30am now, you have learned something through experience.

While this example is, admittedly, a very simple one, the model can also be used for much more complex learning situations, such as those that you experience at the Conservatoire. Whether you are asked to keep a reflective learning blog or not, you will reflect on your experiences to learn from them.

**Why do I need to use formal reflection then?**

Because the situations you experience at the Conservatoire are much more complex than our example of a change in the bus timetable, it can be useful to formalise the reflection process. Writing a regular learning (b)log helps you to remember specific situations and allows you to reflect on experiences you might otherwise forget.

Sitting down to read earlier entries, adding new ones to your blog and perhaps reading about other students’ experiences also provides a good opportunity to take time to think about them in greater depth. This means making an effort, but it also means that you will learn more.
Do I need to use a model of reflection?
A model of reflection can be useful to structure your thinking. Although the different models may look quite different, they all share the 3 step process described in Driscoll’s very simple model:

WHAT?   ▶   SO WHAT?   ▶   THEN WHAT?


The 3 steps could also be written as:

What happened? ▶ What was the effect (good and bad)? ▶ What can I learn from it?

This is a fairly general model that describes the basic process, but does not offer much guidance for reflection. Other people use additional steps that can help us to think more thoroughly about something.


You can use the questions associated with every step of the cycle as prompts for your reflection and structure the entries in your RPJ based on them. Have a look at the example on the next page. It shows the answers to the questions in Gibbs’ s cycle in note form.
You could take notes like this for yourself and then turn them into complete sentences for your RPJ.

Here is an example of an entry based on the notes you just read:

My principal studies teacher suggested I should try to include tremolo exercises in each practice session to improve my technique for *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. I tried to include...
the exercises in my daily practice last week, but to little success. Although my fingers are becoming a bit more flexible in the tremolo I made hardly any progress on the piece. The exercises are so monotonous that I did not want to continue practising after I finished them, so my practice became shorter and shorter. I also practised less because I knew I would get bored, stop and then feel guilty again.

In order to avoid this, I could try to make the exercises less boring by trying some from the School of Tarrega that seems a little more interesting (http://www.guitarramagazine.com/goodtremolo). Perhaps my teacher also has some suggestions.

Another solution would be to change the order and start practising Recuerdos. After this I could do just 10 minutes of tremolo exercises. Even though this is not very long, it will give me regular practice, which is more beneficial than a few, long sessions. Most importantly, it means I will not practise much less, because I can do the interesting work on Recuerdos first.

**Is reflection only useful for students?**

No, reflection is useful for anyone who has to learn or develop their career. It is unlikely that you will find a job you will stay in for the rest of your life doing exactly the same thing for 40 odd years. Instead you will probably work on different projects and in different jobs. This means that you need to take important decisions about the direction of your career and you will have to explain these decisions to others. Reflection can help you to do both: to think about your professional situation and aims in order to take good decisions and to explain your strength to others.

**What do I need to do for the reflective summary?**

The reflective summary is a kind of “meta reflection” that asks you to review and reflect on your progress over a module. The structure suggested for this summary is

your GOALS ➔ your PRESENT reality ➔ the SUCCESS of your strategy

➔ new GOALS

In other words, it asks you to:
The description of your current situation is, of course, more complex than that of the specific instances you reflect on in your RPJ. That is why it is a good idea, to divide it into different themes to make it more manageable. You could, for example, divide your statement into areas, such as “playing”, “understanding of music”, “concert experience”, “employability skills” etc. and then reflect on each of them separately. Which themes you choose depends on the entries in your RPJ, the module on which you reflect and your personal priorities.