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Adjusting the Rearview Mirror: Higher Level Reflection Strategies in First-Year Composition

Jessica Ann Green

Brigham Young University - Provo

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ADJUSTING THE REARVIEW MIRROR:
HIGHER LEVEL REFLECTION STRATEGIES
IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

by
Jessica Green

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Jessica Green

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

Deborah M. Dean, Chair

Date

Kristine Hansen, Reader

Date

Brian D. Jackson, Reader

Date

Danette Paul, Graduate Advisor

Date

Nicholas A. Mason, Associate Chair for
Graduate Studies

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Jessica Green in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Deborah M. Dean
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Date

Phillip A. Snyder
Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

Date

Joseph D. Parry
Associate Dean, College of Humanities

ABSTRACT

ADJUSTING THE REARVIEW MIRROR: HIGHER LEVEL REFLECTION STRATEGIES IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

Jessica Green

Department of English

Master of Art

Part of the curriculum in many composition classrooms contains a reflection component where students are required to think back over their writing and discuss strengths and weaknesses. Yet many of the reflections that students write fall short of the purpose of reflection when students fail to analyze their writing practices or to make future goals for themselves, a problem that occurs when higher level reflection strategies are not taught and practiced in the classroom. When students are taught to use reflection as a way to critically evaluate their writing, to make connections between class assignments and course objectives, and to make goals for future projects, reflection becomes a more useful tool for the composition student.

In my study of two first-year composition classes, I compare the impact of instructing students about reflection and requiring them to practice good reflection

against the more common practice of assigning reflection intermittently without formal instruction or feedback about what makes a constructive reflection. Through the results of my study, I confirm my hypothesis that when higher quality reflection is actively taught and promoted by the instructor, reflection helps students to integrate assignments into the course objectives, to extract personal significance from assignments, and to plan for future projects.

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CONTENTS

Teaching Reflection	3
Studying Reflection	5
Evaluating Reflection	9
Table 1	9
Results	12
Table 2	13
Discussion	14
Works Cited	19

ADJUSTING THE REARVIEW MIRROR:
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“Fostering reflective practice requires far more than telling people to reflect and then simply hoping for the best. I now believe that reflective practice can and should be taught—explicitly, directly, thoughtfully, and patiently.”

—Tom Russell

During my first semester as a graduate student instructor of first-year composition, I read through the department’s requirements for each portfolio that my students would turn in. “Reflection on writing process” was one of the items that my students were supposed to include, and so, with little more thought on the matter, I assigned a one-page reflection on what the students had learned about their writing from the assignment. When the portfolios came in for that first paper, I eagerly turned to their reflections to find out what my students thought they were getting out of my class. Instead of thoughtful observations about the class and the assignment, though, I ended up reading reflection after reflection of the same tired platitudes about writing: “My writing process has improved a lot over the course of this paper” or “I learned a lot about organization.” Though learning and improving are certainly good, I was disappointed that they didn’t give any details or specific ideas about what they had learned or how they had improved. I wondered why they hadn’t evaluated their papers in terms of strengths and weaknesses or talked about their goals for the future.

Despite the fact that reflection is so often assigned in composition classes, few instructors, like me, seem to give much thought to making reflection meaningful or

worthwhile to the students or to instructing students in how to do so. In return we get generalizations that our assignments are “stressful,” “enjoyable,” or “frustrating” without ever gaining a sense of why the students have reacted in these ways.

Research into the importance of critical thinking and reflection on the part of the student shows that reflection, when used correctly, can serve many important functions. Scholars have defined reflection as “a catalyst for learning” (Ghaye 180), “metacognition” (Swartzendruber-Putnam 88), or “a form of mental processing” (Moon 82). Christopher Kayes writes that “reflection serves as the critical evaluator of experience. Without being subject to critical reflection, experience is likely to be taken for granted...Reflection serves to animate experience, ensures its freshness by digging deeper into the nature of experience” (70). These definitions of reflective experience seem quite different from my students’ written reflections, yet all seem to point to the fact that if students are taught to really take the time to make meaningful assessments, reflection can actually help them more critically examine their work and then improve it.

Since reflection has the potential to be so much more than what my students had been turning in, I decided to change my attitude towards reflection in the hopes that this would also change my students’ experience with reflection. I first changed the way I approached reflection in my lesson plans and curriculum, instructing my students in higher level reflection strategies and then giving them feedback on the reflections they wrote that pushed them to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in their writing and to make goals to improve. Once I had implemented these changes, I decided to study the effect they had on my students in two classes of first-year composition that I taught simultaneously. In what follows, I compare the impact of instructing students about

reflection and requiring them to practice good reflection against the more common practice of assigning reflection intermittently without formal instruction or feedback about what makes a constructive reflection. Through the results of my study, I confirm my hypothesis that when higher quality reflection is actively taught and promoted by the instructor, reflection becomes a much more useful tool for composition students in terms of their ability to integrate assignments into the course objectives, to extract personal significance from assignments, and to plan for future projects.

Teaching Reflection

To learn the pedagogy of reflection, I turned to research both inside and out of the field of composition studies. The principles of higher level reflection that I saw repeated most often among the researchers were to give direction to reflection, to model good reflection, to use reflection to evaluate progress toward course objectives, and to teach students to become accurate evaluators of their own work.

Researchers Kathpalia and Heah recommended that teachers give direction to reflection by defining reflection, modeling good reflections, and giving students insightful prompts to encourage critical thinking (313-16). Boud and Walker discuss common problems when reflection is not given direction, such as students who write with no learning context, students who make inappropriate disclosures, and students who have an uncritical acceptance of their experience. They emphasize that “It is important to frame reflective activities within the learning context in which they are taking place. Without some direction reflection can become diffuse and disparate so that conclusions or outcomes may not emerge” (193). Without clear expectations of what I meant by

reflection or what they should address, my students had been left to write vague generalizations that approximated what they thought I wanted to hear.

One way to create those expectations for students is to model good reflection during class discussions or to encourage students to reflect on their work in small groups. Yancey advocates collaboration in reflection, inviting students to brainstorm and make goals together (53). By listening to their peers discuss the specific strengths and weaknesses they have, students can start to evaluate their own writing so that when it comes time to write a reflection, they will already be thinking about their progress and goals. By reflecting occasionally as a class, students are also less likely to fall into the pitfall of becoming overly dramatic because evaluating their writing will seem more matter-of-fact and less like a journal entry when the teacher has already demonstrated the parameters of the assignment.

One of the perhaps unforeseen benefits of reflection is that teachers can use it to help students understand and achieve the course objectives for the class. Harrington makes the argument that “it is through reflection that writers see the patterns that have emerged in discussion, and the threads that need to be followed” (50-51). Without reflective discussions in class and reflective assignments for the students, connections between assignments and course goals (or students’ personal goals) might never be made.

Of course, one of the major criticisms of reflection is that sometimes students don’t have the skills to effectively evaluate their own writing. Kruger and Dunning discuss this problem by stating that such students “suffer a dual burden: Not only do they reach mistaken conclusions and make regrettable errors, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it” (1132). Teaching reflection, then, would include teaching

my students to be accurate evaluators (meaning they could successfully identify true strengths and weaknesses) by asking for evaluative reflections of their own work and then giving them feedback to help them make more accurate assessments. In the September 1998 issue of *TETYC*, O'Neill states that "Although students usually aren't comfortable in the role of self-evaluator, they can be taught to do it" (65). Despite the potential challenges that may arise when teachers invite students to evaluate their own work, O'Neill also emphasizes the benefits of students becoming accurate evaluators through reflective assignments: "Learning to accurately self-assess their writing cannot only help students succeed within a writing classroom but beyond it as well" (64).

Using these principles as the basis for my reformed approach to reflection in the composition classroom, I developed a specific method for teaching and responding to reflections. After a few semesters of using improved reflective teaching (detailed below) in my first-year composition classes, I wanted to evaluate the difference that my change in practices had made for my students. Despite the multitude of claims about how much reflection can do to help students learn to evaluate writing and make goals, I felt it was important to confirm what others have generalized about reflection by validating those claims through quantifiable research. Directly comparing two similar classes of first-year composition would prove, albeit on a small scale, what previous research has claimed: higher level reflection strategies really do make a difference in students' ability to evaluate, improve, and make goals for their own work.

Studying Reflection

For my study, I selected two sections of first-year composition (20 students each) that I would be teaching simultaneously throughout fall 2008. While the classes were by

no means identical, they would be receiving the same curriculum and teaching methods on the same days, just a few hours apart. My treatment class consisted of first-semester freshmen, approximately the same age and eager to start their education. While they started off excited to be in my 12 o'clock class, they pretty quickly became more interested in their social lives and classes specific to their interests instead of my general education, required course. Compared to my other class, the treatment section had a lot more problems with end-of-term stress and general time management as the semester wore on and especially as the culminating assignments were due.

The non-treatment section, by contrast, held more diversity. Some students were significantly older, most having experienced at least one semester of college before they entered my classroom. As more experienced students, a lot of them seemed aware of the need to schedule appropriate time to complete drafts (and be on time to an 8 am class). Despite the fact that these students probably had more family, work, and school-related time constraints than the other section, they seemed to manage their time more wisely, something that had a significant effect on their end-of-term portfolios.

Although my treatment class completed the same assignments as my non-treatment class, I used three additional practices in my treatment classroom to structure their higher level reflections. First, my treatment students were expected to complete reflections almost weekly. I used "rush writes" at the beginning of class to ask the treatment class questions like "What have you learned from working on your second draft of this paper?" Their written responses would then propel our short class discussion about the topic, and sometimes we would brainstorm goals or talk about strengths and weaknesses in their writing during this time. To define and model good reflection, I

always encouraged my students to evaluate their writing in terms of strengths and weaknesses and to make goals about future writing (“One weakness that I saw in this draft was that it was hard to connect each of my points back to my thesis. For my final draft, I want to strengthen my organization through topic sentences that relate each paragraph back to the thesis”).

In addition to these somewhat open-ended definitions of good reflection, the second change I made was to emphasize the difference between a meaningful reflection and a less-meaningful one. To differentiate between more and less effective levels of reflection, I created my own taxonomy of reflection, influenced by several researchers’ taxonomies (Schön; Kathpalia and Heah), but chiefly adapted from one that Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, and Mills had used in evaluating student teachers’ reflections because of its focus on student improvement, evaluation, and goals (Bain et al. 60). I also incorporated into the taxonomy some specific goals that I had for my first-year composition students: to become critical evaluators and to make connections between class assignments and course objectives. Though my hierarchy of reflection changes somewhat with each semester and each class, the taxonomy of reflection I used for that semester ended up being a four-point scale with varying levels of complexity and analysis. Although I never handed this taxonomy out to students or even referred to specific levels of reflection (which would give an unfair advantage to the treatment students by giving them the specific criteria they were being evaluated on when the non-treatment students wouldn’t have access to it), I made sure that the treatment students knew through our discussions and individual feedback on reflections that I was looking for higher-level thinking and evaluating strategies. When students simply reacted to an

assignment, I asked questions to help them look further and evaluate why they reacted the way they did. I praised students who made goals or tried to connect what we were doing in class to larger objectives.

The third change I made was in the way I responded to routine reflections on papers for the treatment class. Both sections were required to complete a one-page reflection for each of the three major papers in the class. The prompt was pretty open for this assignment (reflecting about the paper or their process in general), but I wanted students to have an opportunity to step back and look at themselves as improving writers and students who were learning skills that would help them throughout their education and their careers. For my non-treatment class, I simply gave feedback on the writing and mechanics of their reflections, not on the level of their reflection. In my treatment section, I gave feedback based more on the content and quality of their reflections, encouraging students only reacting to assignments to think more deeply about their writing and helping students make more meaningful evaluations of their writing (“though I have struggled with transitions in the past, I think I implemented some good transitions in this paper, which should help the organization be more apparent” instead of “transitions were hard”).

The response to such activities and assignments, as can be imagined, was mixed. Some students loved writing about themselves and their writing; others were reticent to talk at all about their writing or their progress in the class. I encountered the best responses from students when I framed reflective activities as an opportunity for them to examine our class and how it was helping them develop skills useful far beyond the class. If students could see simple things like incorporating evidence and understanding

semicolons as important beyond the context of our classroom, they usually wrote more meaningful (and honest) reflections.

Evaluating Reflection

At the end of the semester, I assigned both sections a portfolio composed of their best work from the class. I required them to make three selections from their papers (approximately one double-spaced page each), which they then introduced with a cover page describing the strengths of the writing and/or the improvements each selection showcased in their writing ability. In addition to the selections and cover sheets (reflections), students wrote a two-page double-spaced reflective essay to summarize the most important things they had learned in the course. This portfolio was due near the end of the semester.

After my students turned their portfolios in for class credit (they were only graded for completeness to be fair to the non-treatment section), I asked five composition instructors (3 per student portfolio) to rate the portfolios according to my four-point scale, which gives a higher point value to specific skills that are indicators of a higher level of understanding and application.

Table 1

Four-Point Scale

Level 1 – Responding

- ❖ The student describes or re-tells what happened while writing with little additional insight.
- ❖ The student makes an observation or judgment about the assignment without explaining the significance of the observation

or detailing the reasons for the judgment.

- ❖ The student reports feelings such as relief, anxiety, or happiness in response to the assignment.

Level 2 – Relating

- ❖ The student identifies aspects of the assignment which have personal meaning or which connect with their prior or current experience.
- ❖ The student identifies something he/she is good at, something he/she needs to improve, a mistake he/she has made, or an area in which he/she has learned from his/her practical experience.

Level 3 – Reasoning

- ❖ The student integrates the assignment into an appropriate relationship with theoretical concepts or personal experience.
- ❖ The student seeks a deeper understanding of why something has happened.
- ❖ The student explores or analyzes a concept, event, or experience.
- ❖ The student asks questions, looks for answers, considers alternatives, or speculates about why something happened the way it did.
- ❖ The student attempts to explain his/her performance using personal insight or previous experience.
- ❖ The student explores the relationship between theory and practice or the connection between the assignment and the course

objectives.

Level 4 – Reconstructing

- ❖ The student displays a high level of abstract thinking to generalize or apply learning.
- ❖ The student draws an original conclusion from his/her reflections or generalizes from this particular assignment.
- ❖ The student extracts general principles or formulates a personal theory.
- ❖ The student extracts the personal significance of the assignment and plans further learning on the basis of his/her reflection.

A student who wrote a level one (responding) reflection might write something like this: “After writing my analysis of the article, I realized I hadn’t reached the page length, so it was a stressful assignment.” This kind of reporting of what happened and what the author felt about the process, without further evaluation or relation to principles learned, does little more than rehash whether the student was satisfied or dissatisfied with the assignment. A level two (relating) reflection would go a little bit further and attempt to find personal meaning from the assignment; identifying strengths, weaknesses, improvements, or mistakes: “One of the mistakes I made early on in this assignment was that I didn’t start researching early enough, so I learned how long good research takes.” At this level, students evaluate, even in simple terms, what went well and what didn’t in their process or writing.

To reach a level three (reasoning) reflection, students had to analyze their process or writing, trying to explain why something worked or didn’t work for them. At this point,

students also start to integrate the assignment into a larger context that may include the course objectives or simply understanding how an assignment fit with their previous writing experiences: “Though in the past I usually just wrote papers the night before they were due, because we had drafts due in class, I had more time to revise. At first I didn’t want to revise, but after I got feedback from peer review, I realized that my first draft needed a lot of structural revision.” This type of reflection is classified by students making an effort to evaluate their process in the context of class activities and discussing how and why different writing strategies worked.

The highest level (reconstructing) requires that students apply learning and extract the personal significance of assignments: “Even though I had struggled with organization earlier in the semester, I worked hard with this last paper to make the connections between topics clear. Especially after reading unorganized arguments, I realized how important it was to take the time to outline my ideas in an orderly way. For the next paper, I’m really going to work at getting my outline written well before I start drafting.” While this kind of reflection was easy enough to stimulate in class through pointed prompts (“What will you do differently on your next paper?”), students struggled more to create these high level reflections in their final portfolios.

While these different levels don’t necessarily tell the entire story of a reflection, I found them useful as I was trying to evaluate students’ reflections and encourage more meaningful assessments. For the raters, the drawback of trying to assign one score to an eight-page portfolio was that some students show evidence of reflecting at different levels from paragraph to paragraph and sometimes even from sentence to sentence. My raters informed me that there were some portfolios that were difficult to assign just one score,

but overall, the portfolios remained fairly consistent in terms of the level of reflection the students were writing. To alleviate the problem of scoring widely-varying portfolios, I allowed my raters to use half-level ratings (1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3, 3.5, 4) to more accurately assess the content of the whole portfolio. And despite the difficulty of assigning just one score, in an inter-rater reliability test, the raters were able to agree within half a level in about 85% of the cases and within one level of each other 100% of the time.

Results

A total of 33 students from my two classes participated in the study by turning in their final portfolio (which had already received class credit) for participation in the study. Out of that number, 15 students were from my treatment class and 18 were from my non-treatment class. Each of the portfolios was rated by three different raters, and the scores from the two classes were then statistically compared. Although there is a lot of individual variation throughout the different classes, as a whole, the treatment class scores were significantly higher (at an alpha level of 0.05), which strongly suggests that receiving additional instruction in reflection can boost the quality and depth of reflection.

Looking at the two classes as a whole, there are some patterns that seem particularly apparent. For example, out of the 18 students participating from the non-treatment section (each rated three times), there were 20 instances of a level 1 or 1.5 given. From the 15 participating treatment section students, there were only 5 instances of a level 1.5 given and no instances of a level 1 at all. The treatment section also received a higher proportion of 3.5, 3, and 2.5 levels given. The data are summarized in Table 2. This seems to indicate that frequent and higher-level reflection practiced

throughout the semester almost eliminated instances of the lowest level of reflection (simple descriptions of what happened or emotional reactions to an assignment).

Table 2

Percentage of Students Rated at Each Level for Treatment and Non-Treatment Classes*

Ratings	Treatment n=15*	Non-Treatment n=18*
4	0%	2%
3-3.5	29%	13%
2-2.5	60%	48%
1-1.5	11%	37%

*Each student received 3 scores, so percentages are based on total number of scores.

Looking back over the semester and especially at the dynamics of each class, I was actually surprised that the treatment class ended up doing as well as it did. Compared as a whole to the non-treatment class, my treatment students were all first-semester freshmen who were focused on major classwork that they felt was more important than my general education course. My non-treatment students, on the whole, were older and

more experienced at handling the stresses and time management issues that college presents, as opposed to my treatment students who struggled at the end of the semester just to complete assignments. Although this made me initially anticipate poor ratings for the treatment section, instead I was surprised to learn that overall, the treatment class had scored significantly higher than the non-treatment class.

Despite the fact the portfolio came as an end-of-term assignment that many students were too busy to put much time into, this somewhat imperfect sample still demonstrates that teaching stronger reflective practices over the course of a semester helps students to better evaluate writing, connect to objectives, and make goals for future writing.

Discussion

What made the difference for the class that scored significantly higher? Although I certainly can't isolate all the variable factors in a composition classroom, in my estimation, the difference was first, the frequent reflection, and second, the emphasis placed on higher quality reflection throughout the semester.

When students reflect only intermittently throughout the semester, their reflections lack a thread of common interest, perhaps the skill that they are actively working on improving or a particular challenge that they are working to overcome in their writing. John Dewey recognized the importance of frequent reflection almost a century ago when he remarked that people need to learn "*how to acquire the general habit of reflecting*" (35). Thus the assignment of periodic reflections seems valid as it encourages conscious introspection of what the student is learning. Dewey also asserts that "learning is something that the pupil has to do himself and for himself" (36). For

Dewey, who emphasizes the responsibility that students have in taking charge of their education, reflecting upon experiences and the process of learning is integral to education. This principle of students taking charge of their improvement and advancement through frequent reflection is something that my treatment students had a chance to do through our reflective discussions in class and in their weekly reflections, but this is a skill that reflective students will take with them far beyond the composition classroom when students begin to think more critically about what they are learning in other classes or areas of their lives.

The second part of my answer, teaching higher quality reflection, occurs when the teacher models and encourages worthwhile, meaningful reflections. If students are forever stuck in the writing clichés that most use as they begin reflecting, the entire purpose of the assignment is lost. It is when students get beyond those platitudes about writing that they begin to realize the benefits of critically thinking about their learning. In *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Yancey writes that

Through reflection [students] can assign causality, they can see multiple perspectives, they can invoke multiple contexts. Such theorizing doesn't occur naturally: as a reflective social process, it requires structure, situatedness, reply, engagement. When treated as a rhetorical act, when practiced, it becomes a discipline, a habit of the mind. (19)

Here Yancey points out that the benefits of reflection are only arrived at through someone helping students to see what they haven't seen before about themselves or their writing.

For my treatment class, I repeatedly voiced my expectation that their reflections would be more than just expressive reactions to the assignments or appeals for higher

grades. What resulted from this emphasis on quality reflections was a self-awareness concerning writing process that I hadn't seen before in students. Students began to be more aware of their progress in meeting class objectives and to more actively plan their goals for future work. While most students seem to be marginally aware of their writing processes and progress in class, the almost weekly reflections and discussions about their experience in my class significantly increased self-awareness in my treatment class.

Increased self-awareness can take many different forms. Because my composition class is just the beginning of most of my students' college writing, I really encourage students to think of ways that the skills they learn in my class could apply to other classes and areas of their life. One student wrote in her end-of-semester portfolio that

Not only have I applied my knowledge of ethos, pathos, and logos to assignments in my English class, but I've also been able to use these tools in writing papers for other classes and even in my everyday communication. I've been much more thoughtful when I get into constructive arguments with others; I consider how they might feel, why they feel that way, and how I can make the best of the situation.

This is exactly what I hope my general education class will do for my students' writing and communication skills.

Other kinds of self-awareness focus around the writing processes that they learn.

Another student wrote that

Before this class, I had never created an outline because I began and ended a paper with only one draft. Consequently, all of my previous papers have very weak organization. I think that when an outline is not made, not only

is the paper going to be confusing to readers, but also the paper will be very difficult for me to write because I have no structure to rely on.

Contextualizing the process that the student is currently using against past practices is one way that students seem to recognize their own progress, and getting students to evaluate their own practices for personal effectiveness, as this student did, helps students to solidify their approach to writing so that they know how they will tackle their next writing assignment.

My students have also become much better evaluators of their own and others' work through the process of reflection. While students are usually quick to point out the strong points of their papers, I encouraged students to also look for weaknesses in their papers that they could improve on in the future. "If I could go back and edit parts of this paper," one student wrote, "I would definitely go back and introduce the quotes." Another wrote that "I believe that one of my weaknesses in this paper was just getting the topic narrowed down. Even through all the revisions, the focus may be still a little broad even though I tried to narrow it down." Having the students write down what they thought could use more work lets the students start the conversation about how to develop their papers further and can save time in making comments if students have made an accurate evaluation of their paper. Understanding their weaknesses also tends to help students take ownership of the improvement of the paper instead of letting the instructor be in charge of making the paper better.

The most important principle that can be gleaned from this short study is that to make reflection useful, instructors must integrate into their classrooms reflective assignments and practices that encourage students to make meaningful assessments of

their work and progress. As Yancey reiterates, “for reflection to be generative and constructive in a school setting, it must be practiced, must be woven not so much throughout the curricula as *into* it” (201). To truly help students gain the benefits of reflective practice, instructors must first help students see reflective assignments not as just reporting or describing a process, but as an opportunity to evaluate and to make plans for the future. Especially as I watched my non-treatment class in direct comparison to my treatment class, it was obvious that the students who hadn’t been instructed and encouraged to complete higher quality reflections saw little benefit in thinking back over their work. My treatment students, on the other hand, seemed to make more progress on their long-term goals over the course of the semester and to become better evaluators of their work in general as I pushed them to make more meaningful reflections on their work. By taking just a few minutes every week to have them write and then discuss their progress as well as their struggles, I was able to promote more individual improvement and to make reflection a much more useful tool for my composition students.

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