Using Regular Reflections to Better Understand the Classroom and Student Experience After Returning from COVID-19 Disruptions

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Reflection is a practice used in education that encourages metacognition and can provide instructors with regular feedback. This qualitative research study explored the ways that community college students used reflections and what they chose to share. These reflections occurred during the fall 2021 semester, when many classes returned to in person after disruptions due to COVID-19. Students' reflections focused on two major contexts. Many reflections provided perceptions of the classroom, primarily in four areas: content, student-student interactions, barriers to success, and equity and inclusion in the classroom. Additionally, students provided insight regarding their experiences, their goals and aspirations, and what reflections meant to them. Overall, reflections offered us the opportunity to better understand how students were engaging with our courses from an academic and personal standpoint.

Over the last two years, higher education has gone through substantial changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic that left students, faculty, and

staff in unfamiliar territory. Community colleges, similar to other institutions of higher education, were required to rapidly adapt to online and remote teaching to facilitate continued quality learning and engagement. Current research shows that this abrupt transition severely increased stressors and anxiety for students and faculty. A study conducted by Hawley et al. (2021) surveyed college students in several countries that highlighted many COVID-19-related concerns, including, but not limited to, community health and safety, mental health, and uncertainty in educational delivery. In their survey of college students aged 18–24, Lee et al. (2021) noted increases in anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Community colleges have been impacted significantly. For example, some students reported digital divide challenges, such as having no internet; others reported anxiety about being essential workers in high-risk locations, such as hospitals, grocery stores, or restaurants (Bosley & Custer, 2021). A report from Bulman and Fairlie (2021) analyzed California's community college system and noted significant drops in enrollment, particularly with Black, Latinx, and first-year students. In a web-based survey conducted at the beginning of the pandemic (April through June 2020), over 20% of community college students who completed the survey noted use of mental health apps (Borghouts et al., 2021).

Many community colleges are now back in person and returning to a "new normal" as students are welcomed back in the classroom. However, the trauma of experiencing COVID-19 is still in the background as students engage with classmates, their instructors, and staff.

We (the authors) are faculty members at Red Rocks Community College who are part of an interdisciplinary professional learning community (PLC) examining best practices for humanizing the classroom and engaging in inclusive practices (see Location and Context, p. 7). We focus on connecting with students as they are and, as Tarc (2020) summarized, want to re-imagine the classroom and our current pedagogies and facilitate classroom spaces where students can thrive. We felt it was important for students to share their thoughts and feelings about the classroom as they returned to more traditional learning contexts. Some members of our PLC used reflections prior to the transition to online and remote learning necessitated by COVID-19. Using their experience and expertise as a foundation, we all have used regular reflections in our classes as a touch point to understanding how students are processing their learning experiences and struggles. Our goal was to better understand how we can leverage student feelings and thoughts to facilitate a more affirming classroom environment as we continue to navigate the post-pandemic landscape. This manuscript provides our interpretations and implica-

tions to the following research question: What are the ways in which students engage with reflections as they return to classes at a community college after experiencing personal and professional stressors related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

We feel as though this research question is pertinent for community college instructors, as there is not a substantial literature base about experiences returning to the classroom. We also want to emphasize that, though the context of our manuscript will be during the height of COVID-19 and the experiences of transitioning back to more "business as usual," we hope to provide findings that community college instructors find useful in multiple contexts. We all plan to continue using reflections in our courses to have a better sense of how students' experiences change and encourage instructors to think about implementing some forms of reflection in their courses.

Review of Literature

The review of literature will be divided into two distinct parts. First, we describe additional pertinent literature related to the impacts of COVID-19. We especially highlight factors that may disrupt learning experiences and present a barrier to success for students. Second, we provide an overview of literature related to reflection and describe how we have defined reflection for the purposes of this study.

At the start of the pandemic, colleges and universities across the country navigated the unknown due to the rising concerns of COVID-19 and quickly shifted instruction online. This lack of control often manifested itself as stress and worry both for faculty and students (Grace et al., 2021). While students appreciated the communication they had with faculty members and provided grace with the tentativeness and uncertainty to distance learning, they rightfully expressed reservations and higher levels of stress (Grace et al., 2021). A Belgium-based study of 28 countries highlighted socioemotional concerns related to the pandemic, which included fear, depression, anxiety, and lack of motivation (Tasso et al., 2021). While some of these reported stresses involved rapidly learning how to be successful with distance learning, many stressors were a result of personal circumstances.

Community colleges regularly serve historically excluded groups in higher education, such as low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. Data collected during the start of the pandemic show that marginalized communities, particularly Black and Latinx communities, were especially negatively impacted. For example, Black and

Latinx individuals were 4.7 times more likely to be hospitalized when compared with White individuals; one of the factors that influence this is the higher proportion of Black and Latinx individuals who work in service industry positions (Marshall, 2020). A mixed methods study conducted at a Hispanic serving institution highlighted many barriers to success, such as lack of technology access, home-related distractions, and lack of physical social interaction that exacerbated mental health concerns (Mshigeni et al., 2022).

In addition to some of the barriers described above, food and housing insecurity were major sources of anxiety for students. Internationally, food supply chains were disrupted, resulting in lack of access and distribution of food. This particularly impacted lower-income households (Kakaei et al., 2022). At Red Rocks Community College, faculty and staff reported that some students did not have housing or food. As such, efforts were made to significantly increase the student pantry so that students could receive supplies (Gonzales, 2022).

The above literature highlights the complexity of the pandemic and the impacts that it may have had on students. As the world attempts to transition past the initial response to the pandemic, many of these apprehensions and anxieties linger in students. To provide a space for students to articulate their perspective and thoughts, reflective practices may be a useful mechanism.

Research on reflective practices in education is quite extensive, with the earliest work having been published by Dewey (1933). In higher education, reflective practices have increased recently as active learning approaches become more popular (Chan & Lee, 2021). Defining reflective practices has proven to be quite difficult. We attribute this to the nature of reflective practices being very personal, and, thus, reflection has a different meaning for each learner. With that, the authors strived to define what reflection means to us. From the literature, the authors have conceptualized three specific characteristics of reflection that have helped define "reflective practices" for us as a group.

Reflection Is a Process

Reflection is cyclical, and as Moon (2013) describes, connects learning and thinking in ways that deepens a person's understanding of phenomena. Moon (2013) states, "'reflection,' as a process, seems to lie somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting—so 'reflec-

tive learning' as a term, simply emphasizes the intention to learn as a result of reflection" (p. 80).

Reflection Is a Tool

Reflection encourages learners to step back and process what they have learned (Cross, 2018). Oakley states that taking breaks to allow for reflection facilitates the transfer of information to go from short-term to long-term memory (TEDx Talks, 2014). Additionally, reflection also allows learners to apply what they have learned to their personal lives and perceptions, which encourages emotional investment and ownership over their educational experience (Wong, 2016). Learners are better able to make meaning with what they have learned and to think more deeply about how new knowledge and experiences are impacting their preconceived notions (Moon, 2013; Wong, 2016).

Reflection Builds Belonging

Feeling as though you belong to a community is important to persistence in education because learners who feel more "out of place" and believe they do not fit are more likely to perform worse academically and leave (Tinto, 1987). Encouraging regular reflection assignments intentionally invites the whole learner to be a part of the conversation and learning experience (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). This directly develops a more empathetic and inclusive classroom community that promotes connectedness and care (Strayhorn, 2012).

As a result of our literature review and several group conversations, we have conceptualized reflection in the following manner and aimed to achieve the three characteristics above in our classrooms as we returned to in-person teaching and learning.

Reflection is:

- a tool that
    - allows students to articulate what they are experiencing and how they are learning, and
    - allows teachers to understand how students are engaging with the class and provides teachers feedback for "just-in-time teaching" (i.e., meaning we can make quick modifications to the classroom to maximize students' learning experiences).

  Outcome: Both parties have ownership over classroom learning and the norms of respect and learning that get established.

- an effective practice that
  - allows students to develop their agency and voice and bring their whole selves to the classroom and campus in a way that strengthens their sense of who they are and how they experience school as an individual, and
  - allows teachers to affirm and validate the student experience and better understand histories and social and institutional barriers that affect how students navigate their lived experiences.

  Outcome: Reflection builds an inclusive classroom community that promotes equitable collaboration and a sense of belonging.

Methodology

Location and Context

We are a group of faculty members from various disciplines who work at Red Rocks Community College (RRCC) in Colorado. RRCC is located in the Denver-metropolitan area and has an enrollment of approximately 5,000–6,000 students per semester. According to the latest data available on the institution's website, approximately a third of enrolled students are full-time, approximately 51% identify as women, 20% identify as Latinx, and 64% identify as White (Red Rocks Community College, 2019).

We all originally met in an interdisciplinary PLC, which, as Stoll et al. (2006) defined, are groups composed of faculty and staff who share and interrogate classroom and college practices to promote personal and professional growth and learning through ongoing collaboration and discussion. The composition of our PLC members included the following disciplines: anthropology, biology, English, humanities, psychology, and theater. As a part of the PLC, we met biweekly over two academic years and discussed papers related to critical pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy, and trauma-informed pedagogy. The PLC model at RRCC encourages the PLC to implement a classroom change as a result of the group's readings and discussions.

Implementing Classroom Reflections

Our group decided to focus on reflection to better understand how students felt and what they thought as they engaged with course material. During the spring 2020 and fall 2021 semesters, each member of the PLC incorporated reflections into their classrooms to better understand the student experience. While the wording and contexts were different depending on the discipline, all faculty members in the PLC agreed that

the reflections would share the following components: (a) students would submit reflections on a regular basis (e.g., weekly, biweekly), and (b) reflections would engage students with how they are feeling during the class.

All students in our courses were required to complete reflections as a part of their course assessment, and students had the option to consent to faculty members using quotes from their reflections during the fall 2021 semester (internal IRB 051921-01). Collecting consent was completed by a member of the PLC team who was not the instructor of record to minimize any potential feelings of coercion. The instructor of record was not present during consent collection. The faculty member who collected consent forms would come at the beginning or end of the class and explain the internal review board to students. This member kept the consent forms until after final grades were submitted. At the end of the semester, the instructor of record received their students' consent forms and anonymized students and additional identifiers prior to coding.

For online and remote classes, a Google form was created for students to consent to using their reflections. This form was created and run by the first author, who did not teach online and remote classes. In total, 101 students consented to using quotes from their reflections.

Thematic Coding

We conducted thematic analysis and open coding of the reflections in order to ascertain patterns in how students were using reflections in their classes. We read the reflections from our respective classes and each created preliminary categories. We hypothesized that emerged categories would not only highlight content but also include affective dimensions of the student experience as per our definition of reflection. The preliminary categories generally focused on how students were engaging with the content, how students were engaging with other members of the classroom, and how students were feeling about their experiences. We read our own students' reflections because we were able to provide additional context to what students were writing and why. Over three two-hour meetings at the end of the fall 2021 semester, we shared and discussed our preliminary codes and categories in order to identify similarities and differences in how we coded and highlight quotes that we found compelling. We engaged in the same conversations and agreed to a list of codes and descriptions for the codes that were eventually utilized by all members of the group for analysis.

As shown in Table 1, codes were organized by a context (either about the classroom or the individual), and the contexts were further divided

into specific themes that were noticed during preliminary analysis and discussions. Descriptions of the thematic codes are provided.

Table 1. *Finalized Codes for Analyzing Student Reflections for Class*

Context	Thematic Code
The Classroom	**Content**. Students describe their experiences with the course material in the reflections. Students sometimes summarize the major points of class that week, share "muddy" areas where they are still confused, or apply course content to events currently happening to them.
	Student-Student Interactions. The nature of the classroom experience usually incorporates socialization with classmates. This can be through group work and discussions. Reports of these interactions are mostly positive, but there are some reflections that show negative or limited interactions that students may have with one another.
	Barriers to Success. Students can go through academic and/or personal situations that may present a barrier to their academic success in this class. Students describe personal tribulations, such as catching COVID-19 or making sure that their basic needs are met. This is particularly prominent with community college students. They may also describe aspects of their classroom experience that cause barriers to their success.
	Equity and Inclusion. A community college setting often has students who come from different lived experiences, such as being a student of color, immigrant, student parent, or LGBTQ+ student. As such, students engage with students from different identities. Additionally, faculty members incorporate readings, discussions, and activities that purposefully engage students with issues and opportunities regarding equity and inclusion.
The Individual	**Personal Information and Experiences.** Students share information and experiences that they have had through the reflections. Given that all of the students experienced COVID-19, much of what they share is about their personal struggles with the pandemic. They may also describe how they are struggling with schoolwork and projects.
	Goals and Aspirations. Students enter college with personal goals to improve themselves and to attain the education required for different careers. Students often share these ambitions in their reflections so that the faculty member knows why they may be in school.
	Reflections on Reflections. At the beginning of the semester, students often do not know what to reflect on or the purpose of the reflections. Students often find reflections to be useful in a variety of ways and will share their thoughts in their submissions.

Analysis

During the fall 2021 semester, reflections had a profound impact, both in the context of the classroom and in the context of individual students. There were many thoughts shared by students about one another, the day-to-day of the classroom, the content, and how they viewed themselves (Table 2). Table 2 shows students' reflections on each of the thematic codes. The quotes are not all encompassing but showcase a variety of perceptions that may be present for each code.

Table 2. *Representative Student Quotes for Each of the Thematic Codes*

Context	Thematic Code	Example Quotes
The Classroom	Content	I learned a lot this week, and unexpectedly, learned the basic principles of art theory, which was pretty neat … I also learned what a photo essay actually was, which is essentially a compilation of photos that are brought together in such a way so that the viewer can form a particular message or meaning to all of the photos put together … (Nick)
		As a class, we were taught that there were two sides to a composition. One is what the composition is composed of, with the other secondly being how the elements within the composition are arranged. Composition is also the act of creating purposeful text for others such as me writing this report for example. (Amanda)
		I have been working on my Un-Essay and that has been very interesting. I chose Noh Theater and I really want to go to one now. It is amazing to watch and to learn about all the rules … Everything has a reason, the way the stage is set up, to the costumes, masks, and musicians … (Cory)
		I have really enjoyed this class this semester … I learned a lot more in this class than I thought I would have. For instance, last week I went with my family to see Disney on Ice … I noticed how the performers used quick change costumes that can be easily taken off to reveal a new costume … This class was really enlightening, and I look forward to going to more live theater in the future. Thanks! (Matt)

Context	Thematic Code	Example Quotes
	Student-Student Interactions	Reading my [digital story] script to one of our classmates and having them time it and give feedback and vice versa was a pleasure. It was super interesting because my tablemate's story was about her life, so our stories were pretty different … (Yulia)
		It was upsetting and frustrating to hear how M's parents wouldn't accept her for the person she is. Others made comments of everyone having [bad] parents, a sentiment I couldn't relate to. But it did make me realize how prevalent these kinds of issues are especially for people who feel like they don't fit into society. (Rhys)
		Also, thank you for addressing the [Zoom] breakout room silences, I feel as though I am often the only one facilitating the conversation, and often just volunteer myself as the spokesperson for the group I am part of … I wish our discussions were more involved and richer … (Sally)
		I like the comments that [Jason] contributes … it really helps when you can get multiple perspectives on the idea. The Serengeti Rules video was the most interesting school video I have watched in a long time, the concept of ecosystems heavily relying on certain species, and their impact is amazing. (Nate)
	Barriers to Success	This week I didn't really learn anything and that was because I missed both of the days I was supposed to be in class, and I couldn't [go] because I had no gas money. This week I went and picked up my last paycheck, so I definitely have gas for this week of school. (Nolan)
		I am not a fan of the table I sit at. Not because of the people or anything like that, the table itself is at fault and seems to be extremely squeaky. And I do understand it's not the fault of anybody but it can be somewhat annoying at times. (Andrew)
		This week was a bit stressful. I just moved into my new house and the move had been quite a lot of stress. Usually, I'm really on top of homework and getting it done early but with the stress of the
		move I'm just now finishing it up … (Jenna)

Context	Thematic Code	Example Quotes
	Equity and Inclusion	I really liked "The Danger of a Single Story." Too many times I have seen this exact problem in my day-to-day life, especially with the recent removal of Coalition Forces from Afghanistan. People seem quick to assume that what they hear from the news is the only reality of far-off lands. I wish I knew why so many people find it impossible to consider that there are other human beings on this planet, with their own feelings and experiences and [all] that entails … (Brandy)
		This week's film was called I am not your Negro. I have been looking forward to this viewing all semester. I had little knowledge of James Baldwin. However, I love documentaries especially those that highlight systematic racism. A topic that is very relevant today … I was saddened by the fact that his words were still true and relevant today … (Sasha)
		I don't think I have ever been a part of a more welcoming and open community. (Kyle)
The Individual	Personal Information and Experiences	First off let's talk about something … I would kill to go to a Ubu Roi play. Come on, shouting and throwing things, my kind of party. In all seriousness, I think serious humor is some of the best, it's like sarcasm that no one understands. I think that expressionism can be used in dance as well. I did a piece where the song was a man reading a poem and we did a heavy contemporary dance to it. My dad actually cried at the end of it, it was very heavy … (Brittany)
		So far, this week isn't going well. I am completely stuck on what to write about. I don't know what it's like when I think about stuff that I could write about. It's a lot of negative stuff and traumatic stuff lol. It's like I don't want to write about just one thing but I also don't want to write about something negative but i also don't want it to be something basic and boring like the time i met my friend or something … (Lauren)
		My personal experiences being back on campus are both relieving and at times stressful. After trying a semester strictly online, it wasn't for me, and I tried my best to follow through. However, I wasn't as successful as I wanted to be. I'm already hard on myself enough and this didn't help my confidence as a student. (Erica)

Context	Thematic Code	Example Quotes
	Goals and Aspirations	I have been a psychological counselor for almost 20 years and have always really enjoyed biology, anatomy, physiology and all the sciences … At this point I am hoping to go to Physician Assistant school. (Amy)
		I would say my overall goal for this class is to improve my writing style and length of my essays. It seems easier to condense the overall ideas into short bullet points, but it doesn't improve length … (Charlie)
	Reflections on Reflections	I realized with writing this reflection that I have a long way to go but it's helpful to do this. I'm finding it's forcing me to truly think about what I did, what I have learned, and absorb the information. It's also making me more conscientious of how I write … I'm finding myself already critiquing my own writing and how other people may see it. (David)
		The reflections helped me think about the material and the class in ways I might not have without them. Having to sit down and reflect about the last week allows me to make sure I was understanding what was going on and helped internalize everything … I liked having to spend some time reflecting; I intend to keep it up going forward. (Breanna)

In the context of the classroom, reflections opened a window into how students were interacting with course content. Many students used reflections to put what they had learned over the week into their own words. For example, students define composition, outline the differences between traditional and modern theater, and summarize other complex materials and ideas. Below, an English student, Molly, uses a reflection to explain the abstract concept of reading as a constructive process:

On Tue. Sep. 13 we talked about the experiment that Haas and Flowers did. It was a difficult reading about how reading is a "constructive process." We construct meaning as we go as readers … I think what they are saying is that the writer gives you a text, you read this and interpret it your way, it's an interaction between you and the text …

Such explanations not only reinforced content for students, but they also created opportunities for us as instructors to see mastery, or misunderstanding, of concepts. Reflections gave us early and consistent opportunities to tell students they were "getting it" or to redirect their thinking.

Reflections also opened a window into how students were interacting with each other. As is clear in Table 2, students often reflected on how their peers inspired their approach to an assignment or opened their

minds to new ways of interpreting course materials. Students reflected too on how much they were learning about their peers—their career paths, their homelife situations, their hopes and dreams. Sometimes, students gave a shout-out to a peer that they had had a meaningful interaction with by name, which gave us the opportunity as instructors to pass the compliment.

Lily, a psychology student stated,

This class had the most comradery though. I moved to Denver shortly before the pandemic started and hadn't been able to make as many friends as I would like because of it. Taking this class and finding people who are so like-minded and supportive has added so much to my life personally."

Initially unknown to the instructor, this reflection showcased an excitement and desire to engage with others.

Highlighting barriers to success was a particularly important way that reflections helped us build more humanitarian classrooms. While some of the barriers were academic, such as in the example from Table 2 above about breakout room silences, others were more personal: a broken clavicle, lack of gas money for transportation, a big move, being overwhelmed by late assignments. Knowing about such struggles helped us give our students grace and encouragement, particularly when they or family members may have tested positive for COVID-19.

Seth: Week 12 was rough life wise. I am currently bedridden due to COVID. I've been feeling sick [for] a week and went and got tested and it turned out to be COVID, so I currently can't work or go anywhere.

Instructor: I'm so sorry to hear you have COVID. I hope you can get the rest you need and catch up a bit. Take care of yourself!

It also allowed us to put students in touch with college resources, such as counseling, the writing center, and pandemic emergency funds.

Reflections also gave us an opportunity to see whether our curriculum, approaches, and activities were creating the inclusive atmosphere we desired. Students would often comment on how they identified with a particular reading/viewing from a diversity, equity, and inclusion standpoint. In some cases, a student may feel a personal connection due to one of their identities:

The Farewell is one of my favorite movies of all time; I got to watch it for the third time this week, and it was still a great watch. My father

passed away from cancer when I was 13, so there's a lot from this film that I relate to and feel on a personal level. I also relate to the themes of feeling cultural differences as an Asian American. (Cindy)

Other times, students used the reflections to express their concerns and perspectives related to concepts of equity and inclusion.

There haven't been many situations in my life where I have been the minority and I can't tell you how valuable this experience has been to me. Coming to class every day and learning so much every day, as much from the curriculum as my peers, has been invaluable. (Jaime)

The above quotes showcase the vulnerability of some students, which speaks to how the classroom spaces that were created and the opportunity to share personal thoughts through reflection allowed students to fully immerse and engage themselves with the classroom experience.

In addition to reflecting on classroom dynamics and experiences, students were also introspective and detailed personal perspectives and experiences. In many cases, students felt comfortable with sharing their personal experiences and information that they wanted their instructor to know. Many times, it was about past events in their lives. Some students decided to share about their mental health, and others shared their own personal struggles:

Over this past summer, I took the time to focus on my mental health with therapy, because I felt a barrier of holding myself back and not allowing myself to flourish as a student. This really opened doors in great ways and brought to light some of my negative experiences in the past that I've forgotten about. I'm in a better place to be addressing my past for me to move forward. (Heather)

This week I feel like I struggled with my rough draft. I would stare at the blank page and forget why I was writing and what I was writing about. Apart of me felt scared to write about the struggles I had in school with English and spelling, as I read what I wrote I would think to myself that nobody would want to hear this story and I should just keep it to myself. (Angela)

In relation to sharing their personal experiences, some students chose to share their goals and aspirations in their reflections. This gave instructors a good idea as to why students may have signed up for their courses, whether their goal was more general, such as finishing their associate's degree, to being career-related, such as described by Todd, a biology student:

My career goals are ultimately to become a firefighter, with first going through the preferred EMS route via working on an ambulance

and going through the [college's] EMS program. This is important to me because I've always been searching for a career/lifestyle that makes me happy and I'm proud of, and I want to feel good about the work I do.

Finally, without being asked, many students chose to convey their feelings about the reflections. Oftentimes, student comments echoed what we hoped the reflections might do for them, such as helping them engage with their own learning and providing them with insight they might not typically express: "I'm finding it's forcing me to truly think about what I did during class, what I have learned from the teacher and my classmates and synthesizing the information with my past knowledge" (Robbie).

Even though it is evident that there is a lot of benefit for both students and instructors when it comes to reflections, this type of assignment takes a considerable amount of time each week. For the practice to be most beneficial, instructors need to sit down and read through each student's weekly thoughts and respond genuinely so students feel heard. There is not a general comment that can be copied from a compendium of potential responses that might be used. Students want to be heard, and reflections are an opportunity to let a student know that we are listening. For many of us, this was an assignment we looked forward to reading each week since it helped us see what was working and not working in class. It helped us connect with students personally, knowing their struggles and successes, cheering them on when times get tough.

Conclusions

Overall, we present our implementation and findings from student reflections to introduce community college faculty members to the ways reflections have helped us learn more about students' personal lives and the ways in which they engaged with the content and each other. As stated in the hypothesis, the implementation of reflections allowed us to achieve better understanding of students' engagement with content, getting to know them at a more personal level, and validating their experiences. Additionally, we highlighted their flexibility. Reflections can be used in a variety of disciplines, and the benefits were consistent among different courses.

How Was It Valuable to Us, the Faculty?

Reflections were a consistent, structured way to integrate equity and inclusion into our teaching practices. The assignment required us to set aside time each week to check in with *every* student, not just those who

were more social in the classroom, those who asked for help, or, most importantly, those who may have felt more comfortable with us because we looked or spoke like they did. They provided a mechanism for students to teach us who they were and what they needed. They required us to listen. A previous study on reflective practices noted the same benefit for faculty and how student reflections promoted faculty engagement in professional development (Allan & Driscoll, 2014).

Some of us taught online and remote classes and found that the use of reflections encouraged a more mindful approach when responding online. Rather than checking off a completed discussion or assignment, a reflection invites an ongoing dialogue between the student and the instructor, much like a private conversation. As one of us reflected during the writing of this article:

> Throughout the semester, no matter how tired or discouraged I might have felt, I always found myself going to the reflections first. I wanted to know how my students experienced the week's materials. I wanted to know what they thought of a particular assignment. I wanted to understand any struggles they might be experiencing. In an online environment where I didn't see my students, these weekly conversations helped me feel more connected to each student.

How Do We Think Reflections are Valuable to Students?

Reflections also proved valuable to students, as it gave them opportunities to summarize content and think through processes. In science, the benefits of reflection activities have been studied in community college biology and chemistry classrooms (Tawde et al., 2017). In our context, we concur with Tawde et al. (2017) that it allowed students to practice articulating course content and thinking in their discipline.

On another level, reflections gave students a chance to express what they learned, how they learned, how class content connected to other classes and their lives; it gave them a chance to practice metacognition. This was not something that many students had been asked to do before and something they seemed to get better at throughout the course of the semester. Being able to think about one's own thinking and one's own learning needs is something students can take beyond a single class and use to chart their academic pathway, negotiate personal challenges, and generally exercise agency in their daily lives. A previous study supported that reflections developed metacognitive skills that resulted in higher passing rates (Darcy, 2012).

Recommendations

We highly encourage faculty members to try out reflections as a part of their courses, though we also recognize that there may be reservations. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and we provide recommendations that worked within our context. Ideally, incorporating reflections as a weekly graded assignment helps students see the value by making it an integral part of the course. Students know that this is part of their weekly work, and just as with other assignments, students can practice and improve over time. For the most success, instructors should respond to these reflections in writing within the week, acknowledging any concerns, providing clarification regarding content issues brought up, and connecting with the student genuinely. Additionally, full points should be given to a student if a reflection is done, even if just a sentence. If a student is not performing in the reflections as you might desire, provide the student with some concrete examples to help them produce a reflection more in line with what you're seeking.

If a weekly graded assignment does not meet an instructor's style or class constraints, such as teaching in a large lecture hall, instructors might incorporate reflections in other ways. For example, on major assignments (whether projects, papers, tests), a short reflection might be included that asks the student to not only communicate their experience with the assignment, but also to provide feedback on how things are going for them. Using one-minute papers that not only ask students to reflect on the subject matter but include a quick check-in asking "how's it going?" can offer the instructor a lens into what is happening with the student. Instead of responding to each student individually, general remarks can be shared in class, helping students see that their concerns might be shared by others. Should a student bring up a particularly vulnerable moment in their one-minute paper, then you might write a note to that student so they feel heard. Another option is to spread out approximately five reflections in a 15-week course. The frequency of every two to three weeks still yields the benefit of increased communication with students. One of our faculty members does a "hybrid" reflection some weeks where students are provided some Likert-scale prompts and two short open-ended questions to still allow for reflective practice while minimizing the time commitment to review and grade.

We recognize that context matters, and the needs of different institutions and student populations vary. As such, when initially incorporating reflections into a class or a discipline, we believe it is best to do so with the support of others. Professional development might be offered by a

faculty member who has successfully been using reflections, sharing with colleagues the benefits and strategies that are most likely to yield success. Establishing a PLC around the subject of reflections invites those that are interested to share scholarship and practice as they embark on incorporating this strategy into their classes. It provides an opportunity to share class experiences, problem solve challenges, and not feel so alone in trying out a new strategy in the class. Lastly, if possible, we recommend establishing an interdisciplinary PLC. Different disciplines have different cultural and classroom norms, and engaging with faculty from other departments allows for more thoughtful considerations and ideas on ways in which reflective practices could be embedded. Regardless of implementation methods, we believe that the outcomes will be the same: a stronger understanding and connection with students that enhances the classroom experience.

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