

# Researching Rhetorical Reflection

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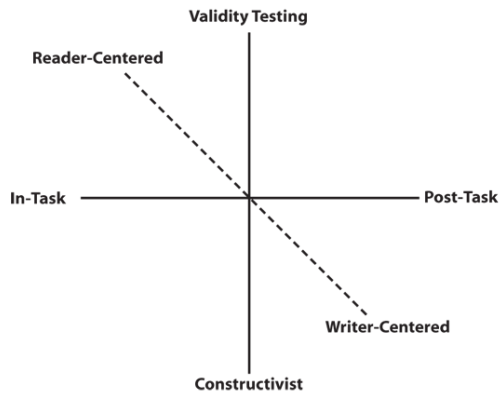
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Today, I am going to share what I found from my investigation into previous research on the subject of my dissertation--"rhetorical reflection." Since rhetorical reflection is a term I have coined, let me define it first.

Jennifer Moon in her book *Reflection in Learning & Professional Development* believes that what distinguishes different kinds of reflection is not the process or nature of the reflection, but the "framework" or purpose to which it is used: "it is the framework of intention and any guidance toward fulfillment of that intention that is significant in distinguishing one act of reflection from another. The mental process itself may not differ from one situation to another" (15).

I have identified two predominant frameworks of reflection within the teaching practice of Rhetoric/Composition. The diagram of the Three Poles of Reflection will help chart out these two frameworks.

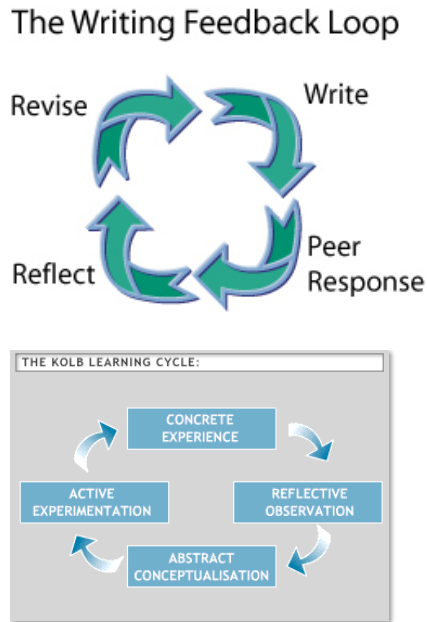
### The Three Poles of Reflection



The first and most common framework in Composition is what I call Curricular Reflection. It is typically done post-task, is constructivist in its learning goals, and is written toward the teacher, often within a context of evaluation. Portfolio letters are the most common form of Curricular Reflection, but mid-term reflections and Writer’s Memos written to accompany final drafts of essays are other common forms. Rhetorical reflection, in contrast, is written in-task. As a result, it is not as concerned with debriefing and synthesizing a retrospective understanding from experience as it is with problem-solving and validity testing within an ongoing activity. Although like most classroom-based reflection it is prompted, rhetorical reflection is written more for the students’ own purposes than for the reader’s or teacher’s purposes. These two frameworks roughly equate to Donald Schon’s terms “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action.”

I call this kind of reflection “rhetorical” because it is specifically for the context of writing, and I have increasingly come to see this kind of reflection as the heuristic extension of invention within the activity of writing and a site where students

engage in negotiating their rhetorical stance and practice. The target for my research are reflective prompts called “Writer’s Reviews” written by students between drafts, after peer response, and before revision begins. The diagram of the “Writing Feedback Loop” represents the position where this kind of reflection occurs:



David Kolb’s “Experiential Learning Cycle” provides a theoretical model as well for understanding this kind of reflection’s place within a process of learning from experience (like the writing process).

Before presenting my meta-analysis of research into rhetorical reflection, I want to provide a brief description of my selection of research and research-related articles. Because no research study has investigated my exact focus of inquiry in the same way I plan to, I had to interpolate what “rhetorical reflection” meant as I decided to include research studies. Reflection has many synonyms such as meta-cognition,

self-evaluation, and reflective practice. Of the 35 sources I included in this analysis, 25 are research studies. The remaining 10 have been included because they either provide good summaries of previous research or are research-related in some fashion. Your handout contains general information about this set of research articles.

### **Information on the Sample of Research Articles on Rhetorical Reflection**

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35 total articles  
 --25 research studies/ 10 research-related

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5 Quantitative  
 17 Qualitative  
 3 Mixed Method

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#### Subject of study:

13 Rhetorical Reflection (writing)  
 5 Rhetorical Reflection (related)  
 5 Curricular Reflection (writing)  
 2 Curricular Reflection (related)

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#### Dates for Studies

2000- 15  
 90s 13  
 80s 3  
 70s 3  
 -60s 1

Studies were found predominantly in these four areas: 1) Classroom-based, Action research (or Action research-like) studies from Composition, 2) Experimental studies in metacognition and writing, 3) Studies in “reflective practice” done for Nursing or Teacher education, and 4) Studies in self-assessment and writing (in some cases closely linked to studies of revision).

The data of in-task reflection examined from these studies varied widely. They included: writer’s memos or writing process statements, tape recorded narratives of writing 1<sup>st</sup> drafts, self-assessment forms or self-analysis questionnaires, taped evaluations of drafts, audio-taped collaborative planning sessions, journals, revision

summaries, MOO logs, pauses and rescanning in the midst of writing, and field observations and video tapes of reflective episodes while teaching. Although these samplings of reflection found in research differ from the exact subject of my study, I believe they still offer significant insights worthy of note.

From my review of 35 research and research-related articles on rhetorical reflection, I have pulled together six convergences in results and conclusions:

***"Deep reflection" correlates with better performance***

A number of studies concluded that better or more sophisticated reflection correlates with better performance (whether that was writing performance or teaching skill). Arguably the first research study in Composition/Rhetoric into reflection arrived at this finding—Sharon Pianko's 1979 article "Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process." Focusing on pauses and rescanning that occurred during the act of writing, Pianko concludes, "The ability to reflect on what is being written seems to be the essence of the difference between able and not so able writers" (277). Chris Anson, studying taped accounts of in-progress drafts, finds a relationship between writers' proficiency and more sophisticated reflective thinking. Likewise, Ellis sees a "cohesive" conception of writing (revealed in reflections) associated with a deeper approach to writing. Each also notes that surface or less sophisticated sorts of reflection correlates with less proficiency. Butterfield and Hacker, in a review of research reports investigating Flower and Hayes' cognitive model of the writing process, cite a number of studies that found

increased metacognitive understanding correlated with increased writing quality. Higgins, Flower and Petraglia studying the influence of reflection on collaborative planning found a significant correlation between the amount of reflective conversation and the quality of students' plans for a draft. Each study is finding a correlation between what we might broadly call "deep reflection" and better performance. The larger question is--what significance does this correlation mean?

### ***Reflection causes improved action***

Many researchers went beyond correlation to suggest a causal link between better reflection and better action (whether that "action" is learning, writing, or practice such as teaching or nursing). Yeo concludes that reflection helps motivate a shift from single-loop to double-loop learning. Craft, Jasper, and Pelham extol the benefits of on-going reflective journals for creating a positive impact on practice, whether it be Nursing practice or research writing. O'Neill and Reimer believe that "writing process statements" or "Writer's Memos" written as a draft is turned in help improve students' "expertise" as writers. Three studies--Flower, McAlpine, and Peck--state that reflection has a significant role to play in the formation and negotiation of meaning and action. One conclusion from Flower's study of whether reflection can help students learn a new literate practice is worth quoting: "Reflection allows writers to recognize some of the complexity of their rhetorical situations, to acknowledge and to honor multiple and often conflicting goals. It seems to make action more immediately problematic but more ultimately satisfying" (289). Each of these studies, however, *suggests* a causal link between

reflection and action—none establishes this causal relationship based on an experimental, scientific methodology. In addition, a number of studies note a complicated link between reflection and revision. Studies done by Rijlaaradam and Peck highlight the difficulties in connecting what happens in a reflection (or self-evaluation or revision plan) and what ultimately happens in a revision. Making a clear cause-effect connection is perilous to do. Peck found that situational variables have a high degree of impact on the process of revision.

### ***The importance of the affective or emotional in reflection***

A number of research studies confirm the important role emotion plays in reflection. These studies seem to confirm the work of David Boud who stresses the importance of “attending to feelings” in the reflective process. Studies done by Efklikes and Shapira highlight the important role affect and emotion has in impacting reflective judgment. If rhetorical reflection is in part about validity testing, then this evaluation is not all rational--we make judgments based also on our impressions and feelings as well. Shapira's research is interesting because she concludes that "affective strategies" have the most important influence on writing quality (this is from a study of 6th graders). Flower in her study makes special note of how reflection allows writers to acknowledge their problematic feelings and fears. She believes reflection creates some “critical distance” on these feelings that allows students to channel this emotional energy into rhetorical action (268).

### ***The ability to reflect is a learned skill***

Numerous studies concluded that reflection is a mental process that must be taught. Flavell in his influential 1979 article “Metacognition and Cognitive Monitoring” stresses that metacognitive knowledge and monitoring skills may be developed. Similarly, Johnson in an interesting 1946 experimental study to develop a paper-and-pencil test to measure Dewey’s “reflective thinking” concludes that the habits and attitudes of this reflective thinking are learned behaviors. Joseph Harris seems to be making the same point when he advocates teaching students the “kinds of labor” that constitute “intellectual practice” in his efforts to improve students’ ability to revise. Jasper working with Nurses and Kraus working with in-service teachers conclude that the skill of reflective writing needs to be learned—students don’t just naturally reflect productively. Likewise, Beach in related work on self-assessment concludes that students must be offered training and models in order to self-evaluate effectively.

### ***Task representation makes a difference***

Three studies focused on revision have stressed the importance of task representation. Through his study of self-analysis statements between drafts, Peck concluded that writers revise papers in different ways depending upon how they represent the task of revision to themselves. Beach in a similar analysis of taped self-evaluations between drafts determined that one of the key differences between “revisers” and “non-revisers” was their conception of the revising process. He broke these differences down to the degree of abstraction (that is, the ability to generalize about their draft), the degree of detachment (the ability to consider alternatives),



and their attitude toward revision. Higgins, Flower, and Petraglia, trying to account for cases where students reflected less, speculated that the lack of reflection may be due to an inappropriate understanding of the goals of the task.

### ***Knowledge makes a difference***

Studies indicate that two kinds of knowledge are important for productive rhetorical reflection. The first kind of knowledge is metacognitive. We might summarize the previous finding related to task representation as stating that metacognitive knowledge about the task of reflection and its place within the larger task of writing and revising is important. Butterfield and Hacker point in particular to the work of Bracewell (1983) who concludes that revision is guided by metacognitive understanding. The second kind of knowledge is content and experiential knowledge. McAlpine in an interesting study of reflective episodes of Math teachers as they taught concludes as his chief finding “the extent to which knowledge provides the basic structure for enabling the process of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action to be effective. Without the domains of knowledge, the professors would have difficulty defining goals, generating plans, deciding what to monitor and how to evaluate cues, and making decisions” (128).

### **Conclusions**

So what do these convergences mean? What does previous research into rhetorical reflection reveal and confirm?

First, I think that research provides some confirmation that rhetorical reflection does make a positive difference for practice and learning. But I think this research also suggests that there are particular factors that influence reflection—training, emotion, self-representation of the task, and a framework of knowledge. This research says that as teachers we need to orchestrate our use of reflective activities carefully, and as researchers it provides some guidance on what to attend to as we design studies and analyze data.

I want to close by mentioning what, I believe, is missing in this sampling of research. I miss seeing examinations of the development of reflection and reflective ability and any relation of that development to learning or writing development. I'm thinking specifically of any linkages to the extensive longitudinal work done by King and Kitchener into the development of "reflective judgment." I hear no voices mentioning learning styles, or personality types, or gender, or cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For me, these missing concerns provide equal guidance for research into rhetorical reflection.

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