

What Previous Research Reveals About Rhetorical Reflection

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A review of 35 research and research-related articles on rhetorical reflection reveals a number of general convergences in results. The full annotated bibliography of these sources is available from the [Lirvin Research site](#).

"Deep reflection" correlates with better performance

A number of studies concluded that better or more sophisticated reflection correlated 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). Anson, studying taped accounts of in-progress drafts, finds a relationship between writer's 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 more surface or less sophisticated sorts of reflection reveal 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 is noting 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). It should be noted that each of these studies *suggests* a causal link between reflection and action—none establishes this causal relationship empirically. 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) 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 Efklides and Shapira highlight the important role affect or feelings and emotion have in impacting reflective judgment. If reflection is in part about validity testing, then this evaluation is not all rational--we make judgments based also on our impressions and feelings. 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 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 concludes that the skill of reflective writing needs to be learned—students don't just naturally reflect productively. Likewise, Kraus working with in-service teachers claims the disposition of reflective practice must be taught and cultivated. Lastly, 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 reflection. The first kind of knowledge is metacognitive. We might summarize the previous finding 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 et. al. in an interesting study of reflective episodes of Math teachers as they taught conclude as their 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).