

Eliciting Critical Incidents in Focus Group to Encourage Student Reflection on Class Experiences

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Context: In-class and out of class; Art and Engineering, Environmental Engineering

Keywords: focus groups, emotional indicators, critical learning incidents

Student Activity Time: 20-50 minutes

Students individually and collectively reflected on their experiences in a course by identifying critical incidents using trigger statements.

Introducing the Reflection Activity

Initially as part of a research and teaching project, the educator and her colleagues Joachim Walther (Assistant Professor, UGA) and Tracie Costantino (now Assistant Dean of Faculty, Rhode Island School of Design) engaged first year environmental engineering and third or fourth year art students in identifying emotional indicators to understand their experiences in a transdisciplinary art and engineering studio. The purpose of this reflective activity was for students to identify and describe their critical learning incidents in the course and to later reflect on what that incident meant to them personally and how it could influence their future learning.

Prior to engaging students in this reflection activity, the teaching team developed trigger statements that paired different types of emotions with class experiences (see <http://www.asee.org/public/conferences/1/papers/2056/view> for more details about this process). About halfway through the course and at the end of the course, the educator talked to students about the importance of reflecting on experiences. After this conversation, students reflected, in groups of 4-5, on their experience in the course. For the first five minutes of the reflection, students individually reflected by reading through a list of trigger statements--emotional indicators (e.g., frustrated, excited, impatient) that were connected to class experiences—and wrote down incidents that come to mind. For example, “I was really frustrated, when a teammate came to class and didn’t do the things they said they were going to do,” or “I was really excited when a student at the last minute submitted it and did all the work.” Then the groups engaged in a discussion about their individual incidents that were sparked by the trigger statements. During these group discussions, a member of the teaching team facilitated each focus group, listened to their conversation, and asked probing questions to find out what happened and how that event impacted them. By the end of these focus groups, each student left with at least one critical learning incident they could elaborate on in a written assignment.

After the in-class focus groups, students individually reflected about one particular critical incident in more detail. In this written assignment, students wrote one-page about a single situation using the SAID framework¹. *Situation*: what happened, what was the critical incident, be specific and give details. *Affect*: how did it make you feel, how did it impact you, what was your emotional response to what happened? *Interpretation*: how did you interpret it, what did it mean to you, what role did you play, what role did others play, what caused you to see things differently? *Decision making*: if it was a positive experience what would you do in the future to make this happen again, if it was a negative experience what would you do next time to avoid this situation or deal with it better?

In terms of outcomes, in reflecting on their critical learning incidents in class, students may better understand what they learned in the class and the value of that learning. The students may also have new ways to describe, understand, and situate their experience and be better equipped to reflect in the future.

Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Compile a list of trigger statements that may be representative of students' experience in class.
2	Engage students in a conversation about the value of reflection.
3	Split students into groups of 4-5 with one facilitator per group, and, ideally, one room per group.
4	Engage students in using trigger statements to elicit critical learning incidents.
5	Have students debrief individually by writing up a critical learning incident using the SAID framework.

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7.1 Example Focus Group Questions

7.2 Focus Group Timeline Plan

7.3 SAID Reference – Hogan

In the words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

Realize the value of such a reflection activity. The first time I used this reflection activity in the art and engineering class I realized that it helped the students' learning significantly. Initially, I was concerned that it was taking time out of class, but was then amazed while facilitating two focus groups and reading their write-ups at how much this helped students and their learning.

Implement at different times throughout the course. In my experience, it has worked well to engage students in this reflection activity once in the middle of the course and again at the end of the course. This approach provided students with multiple engagements with the reflection activity. The first time around students don't understand why they should engage in this reflection

¹ Hogan, Christine. "Creative and Reflective Journal Processes," *The Learning Organization* 2.2 (1995): 4-17. Web.

activity, but once they get used to it, they begin to understand the impact, particularly later in the program.

Think about the logistics. Use graduate students or upper classmen to help run these focus groups because it does take coordination to facilitate the individual conversations in the focus groups.

Demonstrate the focus group structure to the class. Run a structured focus group with entire class sitting around the “fish bowl” to demonstrate how to run and participate in a focus group. Then have the students in the fish bowl example run subsequent focus groups.

Be comfortable with pauses. Some students will not automatically step forward to express their experiences. In these cases it is helpful to wait for a student to step forward. If no one steps forward, the facilitator can break the ice by describing one of the situations that came to their mind when reflecting at the beginning.

Let students fully share their reflections. Let the students fully share their reflections and try not to interrupt them unless they go off on a tangent or become too emotional or too theoretical, bringing them back to talking about a specific example.

What was the inspiration for the reflection activity? This reflection activity initially started as a research project with Joachim Walther and Tracie Costantino, but it developed into a useful reflection activity to use during all courses as it helps encourage students to reflect on their learning.