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5 MINUTE READ

15 ways to spark student reflection in your college classroom

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In a [2014 study](#) from the Harvard Business School, researchers confirmed what many higher ed faculty members know already – reflection matters. The professors conducted three different experiments (with university students and people in the workplace), and the results were



consistent. Simply asking test subjects to take a few minutes to reflect resulted in better performance over time – improvements of up to 25%.

Reflection can feel like just one more thing to cram into an already too-short course. But stopping to take a breath rather than jumping right to the next project or activity helps students learn from mistakes and recognize strengths and weaknesses. It can make the difference between success and failure, in school and beyond.

Are you looking for some new ways to increase student reflection in your college or university classroom? Here are 15 ideas you can try tomorrow.

1. Write the one-minute paper

How much could you explain in one minute? At the end of class, set a timer and ask students to record their most eye-opening revelations or biggest questions. This activity lets students reflect on learning and build writing skills – plus you'll get a window into their understandings and misunderstandings. Here are [some prompts](#) you can use to get students writing.

2. Sketch reflections

Have you discovered [sketchnotes](#)? It's a visual notetaking style that mixes writing, drawing and other visual cues. And it's not about the quality of the art – it's about how a different medium prompts students to look at learning from a different perspective. Sketchnoting is often used for lecture notes, but it's just as effective when students need to reflect.

3. Create reflection snowballs

This one's not for the faint of heart, but in the right class it can be a fun way to shake things up. After a mini lecture or presentation, all your students write a key reflection on a sheet of paper and crumple it up. Then they toss their papers to the other side of the room. Once students catch a "snowball," they read it, add something new and repeat.

4. Make space for reflection

Reflection can happen anywhere – but certain environments just make it easier. The ideal active learning classrooms, for instance, are easy to reconfigure for different activities, giving opportunities for both solitary reflection and group sharing. For more tips and guides, [get your free active learning spaces eBook](#).

5. Develop a professional portfolio

[Portfolio building](#) is a mainstay of arts programs, where students need concrete ways to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge and experience. But the act of choosing one's best work – and articulating why – can increase reflection in many schools of study.



6. Use dedicated reflection journals

Journaling is a tried-and-true reflection activity – especially for practicum-based programs like nursing and education where it's crucial that students connect theory to reality. But there may be some options you're not aware of (ever used key phrase journals? Double-entry journals?). Here's a run down on some [ideas to try](#).

7. Get students blogging

If you'd like to take reflection into the cloud, blogs can be an excellent way to give student writing more value. And it's simple to bring in links, images, videos and more. For a peek into how one university uses blogging to enhance student learning, check out [Vanderbilt University's resource page](#).

8. Take videos

To give your students a fresh perspective on a presentation, performance or practical skill development, pull out your phone or tablet and record it. Watching themselves can give them (and you) incredible insights into their progress.

9. Write exit slips

Before students leave your class, ask them to quickly jot down what they've learned on a sticky note (or answer another reflection question). Or save a tree and use collaboration software like [Span™ Workspace](#) instead. Students can pull out their phones or laptops to [quickly add ideas](#) to a shared digital canvas, which they can access anytime.

10. Capture quotable learning highlights

Sometimes reflection comes from teasing out the ties between coursework and “real life.” Ask students to choose a famous quote and explain why it connects to a concept from class. They could also choose a song, a piece of art, a brand – anything that gets them thinking deeper and reveals a bit more about their passions and interests.

11. Take reflection breaks

Reflection can't be forced, but it is a habit that can be instilled. Build reflective practice by stopping work periodically and encouraging students to record their thoughts about what they've learned. You can boost the reflection by having students share their thoughts with a peer. Eventually, students will start to reflect on their own, without your direction.

12. Add regular sprint retrospectives



Take a page from the [agile process](#) (not just for software developers anymore) and introduce sprint retrospectives. Every few weeks, you can set aside time to encourage students to reflect on where they've been and where they're going. This is especially useful in helping student project teams avoid the usual pains of group work.

13. Incorporate revision into assessment

Some of the best opportunities for reflection occur during the assessment process. Rather than having students submit work for a grade and then promptly forget about it, try giving them descriptive feedback instead and let them resubmit until they achieve mastery.

14. Prototype and test

Take inspiration from [design thinking](#) (championed by [Stanford's dSchool](#)) and create more meaningful opportunities for reflection. The end stages of the process – prototyping and testing – are particularly helpful. Design thinking is often associated with creating something concrete, like an app, but any project could benefit from a design-focused lens. Here's how [Macromedia University](#) does it.

15. Model your own reflection

Actions speak louder than words. So make sure to model the same reflection skills you teach. Don't be quiet about it either – talk out loud through your thought process to show students that reflecting doesn't stop in the undergrad years.

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Editor's note: This post was originally published October 2015 and has been updated.

Topics: [Reflection](#) [Active Learning](#)

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