Reflective Essay: A Personal Inquiry[1]

CRD 20: Food Systems, UC Davis, Fall 2015

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A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

— Albert Einstein, quoted in Eves (1977: 60)

[T]he self is not a scrap of turf to be defended but a capacity to be enlarged.

— Parker Palmer (2007: 39)

[E]motions and thoughts cannot ultimately be separated. Even the perception of a quality, like color, is held to carry within it an affective dimensions. Nor is there an idea of pure sensation without any accompanying cognitive event.

— The Dalai Lama (1999: 31)

[T]he basis of the self is an organic excitement. We can only try to free and discipline this excitement, educate it, so that the scope of our identifications and sympathies is broadened and deepened. Failing this, the beautiful Chinese proverb, "The Heavens, the Earth, and I are one flesh" remains merely pretty words.

— Bruce Wilshire (1992: 216)

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory … [T]herefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.

— Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, cited in Said (1978: 25)

When we reflect upon our beliefs and the concepts we use, we often change them in the process: we notice and try to resolve inconsistencies and so we come to understand ourselves and the world in a new way or to discover new "levels" of meaning.

— Andrew Sayer (1992: 39)

Assignment overview

This assignment requires you to write a reflective essay in which you reflect on the connections between (1) your fieldwork experiences in lab and your theoretical and conceptual knowledge developed in lecture, reading, and writing, and (2) your personal development, especially the ways in which you think, act, and feel were affected, and how they remained consistent, throughout the quarter, and why. By *reflect*, we mean focusing thought on past and current personal experiences and learning — from the start of the quarter until now — in such a way as to examine its effects, impacts, and usefulness. Your reflection should be directed critically to scrutinize your own viewpoints, claims, arguments, and their premises, as well as those acting upon you. It should also delve into the realm of self-awareness by looking inward and analyzing yourself. Important note: your Lab Manual contains a Reflective Essay Worksheet for recording experiences and their effects on you. If you want to do well on the Reflective Essay, we highly recommend using the worksheet during the course to document your development (changes in how you think, act, and feel) as it occurs. Your essay should be 5-6 pages (maximum of 1,500 words), double-spaced, and in a 12-point, serif font.

Deadline and lab time for making progress

- Lab 5 will have time for thinking about and/or working on your essay.
- Lab 7 will have time for your TA and tutor to discuss expectations in more depth.
- Your final reflective essay is due on SmartSite no later than 11:55 p.m. on December 11. It will NOT be accepted after this deadline.

Course grade

This assignment is worth 18% of your total course grade.

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[1] This assignment was inspired by G. Lieblein, T.A. Breland, and N. Sriskandarajah's "Analysis of a Farming System and Conversion Planning: Guidelines for the project work in Agroecology and Farming Systems (PAE302)," NOVA Agroecology M.Sc. Program, Norway, 2005. Adaptation done with Damian Parr, numerous CRD 20 TAs and tutors, and supported by a 2008 Undergraduate Instructional Improvement Program grant from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at UC Davis.

The overarching goals: (1) connecting fieldwork to concepts and theories, and (2) analyzing your personal development

Some important goals of the class are for you to (1) improve your ability to link the concrete situations and practical issues experienced in the field with conceptual and theoretical knowledge developed in lectures, discussions, readings, and your writing, and (2) to connect your intellectual development with the other parts of your being, including your values, emotions, and behaviors. The Reflective Essay is your opportunity to demonstrate these abilities through personally reflecting on your learning experiences and their impacts (see figure below on connections to make).

Choose a rhetorical situation

There are different ways to write your reflective essay — choose the one from the list below that you prefer. With all of these, we want you to approach the assignment with honesty and with the goal of reflection outlined in the overview above.

1. A letter or series of blog entries to a family member or close friend

Write your reflective essay as a letter or a series of blog entries about your learning experiences in the class. Unlike in much scientific writing, you should liberally use "I" and "my," as it is a personally reflective essay about your own learning process. Your level of explanation of your experiences should be sufficient for someone who has heard about the class in detail from you before, which means that you do not need to go into much descriptive depth about the experiences themselves, since the focus should be on your development. A variant on this is writing it as a personal journal, in which case the audience is yourself rather than a friend or family member.

2. A narrative written about your learning experience from the third-person perspective

This rhetorical situation should be written as a short story about yourself, written from a narrator's perspective (third person). If your name in Allison, sentences should be written such as, "Allison woke up the next morning and realized … ." It should be a story that sets up a problem, contradiction, or paradox related to the learning process and presents a resolution of some kind. This can work with a number of genres, including mystery.

3. Recommendations to incoming CRD 20 students

Draw on your personal learning experience in the class to provide lessons and advise for

incoming students to the class next fall. Your reflections can be structured in a way that explains what you think worked well and what you should have improved now that you have gone through it (improvements can be suggested for future student behaviors and attitudes, and for the class and its instructors). As with the first rhetorical situation, you should use "I" and "my," but you can also use "you" and "yours" when addressing your reader. Note that these recommendations will be shared only with the professor and TA's, although we may approach you after the class is over to get your permission to use your essay or portions of it for future students.

4. Create your own rhetorical situation

The rhetorical situation you come up with should be named or described at the start of your essay, but does not contribute to the word count. If you choose to create your own rhetorical situation, please discuss with your TA two weeks in advance of the due date to let them know and get their advice.

Components of your Reflective Essay

First, <u>briefly</u> describe the food system

Briefly explain its structure[2] and functioning[3] ("**what**" the food system is) as you understand it now, using food systems concepts such as the sections of the food system (agri-inputs, production, processing, distribution, retail, consumption, and disposal/ recycling); market segments such as organic, conventional, fair trade, local, etc.; and commodity chains, nature-society relationships, globalization, etc. Briefly relate your current understanding to "**how**" you studied it. This should be shorter than half a page.

Second, explain what you brought to your study of the food system

Using the "Background" column of your Reflective Essay Worksheet as data on your personal experience, explain the interests, previous experiences, apprehensions, preconceptions, biases, and/or theoretical lenses you brought to your study of the food system. Pay particular attention to your goals and values involved in your study of the food system ("**why**" you studied it). Goals are the desired result of an action, while values are one's standards of personal and social behavior and the judgment of what is important. How did your background, and your goals and values, inform your learning? This should be at most 1 page in length but can be integrated throughout your essay.

Third, reflect (by creating a DIAGRAM and ESSAY) on your personal experiences with your food system inquiries and what it means for how you think, feel, and act

You should put the majority of your effort towards *reflecting* on your learning and research process. This has two components: (1) your diagram of your experience in the course, including the identification of events, experiences, and lessons as they relate to your feelings, thoughts, and actions; and (2) your narrative that makes sense of your

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[2] Structure here refers to the material and social arrangements that constrain and shape food production, distribution, and consumption. Material structure refers to the biological and physical components of ecosystems. Social structure includes roles that individuals fill, the relationships between different groups (including social differentiation along the lines of gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, etc.) and cultural and institutionalized norms that shape the actions of social agents.

[3] Functioning refers to the ways in which people go about feeding themselves and others, and the ways in which various social units (households, companies, governments, non-governmental organizations) are involved in the food system. This involves individuals and social units (1) using and influencing *material* components (soil, fossil fuels, packaging, environmental consequences, food itself, etc.) and (2) assigning *symbolic* components (purposes, meanings, motivations, values, etc.) to their and others' activities.

reflections. Use the "Lessons Learned" and "Personal Impacts" columns of your Reflective Essay Worksheet as data to help and guide you in these reflections.

One starting point is to consider who you are as a human being, and what about you changed (if anything) and what about you was reinforced (if anything) during your study of the food system. Consider also why the changes and lack of change occurred. Relevant questions include: What have I learned in terms of my ability to understand and act on complex, real-life situations? Have I improved my abilities to link concrete situations and theory? How has my thinking about systems changed? How have my competencies around communication, cooperation, and learning been affected? How was my learning influenced by communication with food system actors (farmer, distributor, retailer, worker, etc.), the location itself, my classmates and team members, and my instructors? Can I better evaluate my reasoning as it progresses, and recognize where it is strong and where it is weak? What are the implications of my learning experiences in this class for my future activities? Have I developed my self-awareness, and, if so, what are the consequences of having greater self-awareness? Also consider "next steps." Will you look at food differently moving forward? Will you get involved with activities on campus or off campus? Will you change your diet? Will your actions and feelings remain the same as before the class? Why or why not?

In addition to considering these questions, you should keep your other CRD 20 assignments so you can ponder the learning process facilitated by them and reference some of these experiences in your Reflective Essay. In addition to your Reflective Essay Worksheet, your Competency Self-Assessment and VARK Assessment can be useful practical starting points for reflecting on your learning.

Note that this suggested approach to the reflective essay should be used as a starting point. It may be considered a guide to dealing with the challenge of the whole process of studying the food system with which we live, learn, and work daily. You should feel free to emphasize the areas you consider most important and to move in a direction that you find most meaningful and personally fulfilling, but do pay attention to the rubric's requirements. As always, approach your TA, tutor, and/or professor for help.

List of assignments to consider in your reflections

<u>Electronic files:</u>

1. SmartSite Profile for Discovering Our Class Community
2. Food Diary
3. Two Midterm Exam Outlines (with or without comments)
4. Midterm Exam Essay
5. Off-Campus Team Project presentations and written component
6. Two Final Exam Outlines (with or without comments)
7. Final Exam Essay

<u>Hard copy:</u>

1. Food System Mind Maps (beginning and end)
2. Competency Self-Assessment (with data from beginning, middle, and end)
3. On-Campus Team Project Report (from outline in Lab Manual)
4. Free write and draft of Reflective Essay
5. Lab Manual, especially the Reflective Essay Worksheet

References

Eves, Howard Whitley. 1977. Mathematical circles adieu. Boston: Prindle, Weber & Schmidt.

Palmer, Parker J. 2007. The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Said, Edward W. 1978. Orientalism. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books.

Sayer, Andrew. 1992. Method in social science: a realist approach. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

The Dalai Lama. 1999. Ethics for the new millennium. New York: Riverhead Books.

Wilshire, Bruce. 1992. Resistance to tolerance and pluralism in world-community: otherness as contamination. In Revisioning philosophy, edited by J. A. Ogilvy. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Rubric: Reflective Essay

Criteria	Excellent (1 x pts)	Adequate (0.8 x pts)	Marginal (0.5 x pts)	No credit (0 x pts)	Score
WHAT, HOW, AND WHY OF FOOD SYSTEM INQUIRY (3 pts) — Expectations: Essay contains (1) use of food systems terminology to succinctly refer to class activities with minimal description, (2) discussion of student's background experiences and values and how they relate to student's fieldwork, and (3) discussion of goals and values explored.	The essay is excellent in meeting each expectation.	The essay shows a good effort in meeting each expectation, or two are well developed while another is lacking.	The essay shows a marginal effort in meeting each expectation, or one is well developed while the others are lacking.	The essay does not use food systems terminology, nor does it discuss background and fieldwork, nor goals and values.	____ of 3
REFLECTION ON YOUR LEARNING AND RESEARCH PROCESS (8 pts) — Expectations: Demonstrates reflective thinking (self-analysis) through: (1) identification and description of emotions experienced and their connections to how the student thinks and acts, (2) a characterization of change or stasis in the way the student thinks, feels, and acts as experienced over the quarter, (3) justification/explanation of the change or stasis in thinking, feeling, and acting, and (4) explanation of the relationship between emotional, intellectual, and behavioral trajectories.	The essay is excellent in meeting each expectation.	The essay shows a good effort in meeting each expectation, or two are well developed while another is lacking.	The essay shows a marginal effort in meeting each expectation, or one is well developed while the others are lacking.	No reflective thinking is present; instead, the essay purely descriptive of events or is a composite of facts gleaned from other sources (whether cited or not).	____ of 8
DIAGRAM (3 pts) — Expectations: A graphical representation of the relationship between (a) events, experiences, and lessons and (b) student's emotions, thinking, and behavior that occurred during the quarter that (1) is concise and demonstrates appropriate word choice and (2) establishes connections between class activities, lessons, and student's life.	Does (a) and (b) excellently and meets both numerical expectations very well.	Does (a) and (b) and two of the numerical expectations are fairly well done.	Does (a) and (b) and only one of the numerical expectations are well met, or each are poorly met.	Does not include a diagram.	____ of 3
ORGANIZATION (2 pts) — Expectations: (1) the organization of the essay is logical and develops ideas and arguments throughout, (2) the conclusion goes beyond summary to explore implications or specific needs for further knowledge and/or action, and (3) the thesis is explicit and thoughtful and goes beyond summary to analyze, explore, and connect ideas.	Each expectation is extremely well met and appropriate to the rhetorical situation.	Each expectation is fairly well met and appropriate to the rhetorical situation.	At least one of the expectations is adequately met and mostly appropriate to the rhetorical situation.	None of the expectations are adequately met.	____ of 2
QUALITY AND MECHANICS OF WRITING (2 pt) — Expectations: Essay demonstrates correct grammar, punctuation, word choice, and spelling.	Meets expectations by showing no errors.	Mostly meets expectations by showing a few errors.	Mostly meets expectations by showing a moderate number of errors.	Does not meets expectations; shows many errors.	____ of 2

Total (of 18): ____