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Opportunities and pedagogical challenges

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2018

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Pelger, S., & Santesson, S. (2018). *Reflective writing in the curriculum: Opportunities and pedagogical challenges*. Abstract from ISSOTL18, Bergen, Norway.

Total number of authors:
2

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Reflective writing in the curriculum – opportunities and pedagogical challenges

Susanne Pelger & Sara Santesson

Abstract

Learning how to learn is one of the most important tasks for students in higher education. If students understand their own learning processes, it will have a lasting impact on their ability to learn – even outside university. Therefore, students' ability to reflect on their knowledge and learning is one of the overall requirements for a degree in Swedish higher education [1]. Consequently, this ability needs to be taught and trained throughout the education [2, 3].

In a recent study [4], we explore how reflective writing can be integrated in content studies as a means of stimulating and improving learning. The study comprises three case studies, where academic teachers from different disciplines introduced and analysed the outcomes of reflective assignments in their content courses. The analyses of students' reflective texts were conducted by the teachers using qualitative content analysis [5]. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, the teachers met (on three occasions) for the purpose of discussing their findings and giving peer-feedback. Hence, the overall results of the current study emerged from the three case studies through a research process that was characterised by collegial exchange and support. As such, the study could thus be seen as an example of how the scholarship of teaching and learning can be carried out in practice.

The results show that integration of reflective writing in the curriculum can support subject learning as well as the development of generic skills. The results also suggest that reflective writing promotes students' metacognitive skills and development towards a reflective professional practice. In addition, reflective writing can support other generic skills, such as the ability to establish long term goals, plan and take responsibility, and support fellow students' learning through peer-feedback. An overall conclusion is that reflective writing has impact not only on the individual student's learning, but on the whole learning environment.

In our presentation, we will summarise our findings and suggest how students can learn to master the genre of academic reflection. We will also show examples of how academic reflections can be used for promoting progression, helping students fulfill their requirements, and bridging the gap between higher education and professional practice. Finally, we will discuss the opportunities and pedagogical challenges with integrating reflective writing in content courses, and share the teachers' experiences and recommendations from the study.

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