

Book Reviews

Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives 2/2

A handbook of reflective and experiential learning: Theory and practice.

Jennifer Moon (2004). London: Routledge Falmer. (252 pp.). Reviewed by Kenneth Carr, College of Education, Zayed University

This is an in-depth analysis of something that many working in educational contexts often take for granted. By this I mean we often use the word 'reflection', encourage our students to 'reflect' and discuss the development of the 'reflective practitioner'. But what are we really talking about? Moon takes the concepts apart and carefully analyses what we mean by 'reflection', and the related ideas of 'learning' and 'experiential learning'.

The first part of the book takes a general look at learning *per se*. Included in these chapters are her views on the process of learning, how learning may be structured by the individual, and an interpretation of the relationship between emotion, feelings and learning. Emotion may inhibit or facilitate learning, of course.

Part two is entitled 'exploring reflective and experiential learning'. Moon defines reflection as 'a form of mental processing – like a form of thinking – that we may use to fulfil a purpose or achieve some anticipated outcome ... Reflection is applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas of which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding of what we already possess' (p. 82). This is then related to a generic view of learning and a description of the concept 'depth of reflection'. Experiential learning is less easy to define, and at the start of chapter eight Moon offers several definitions for it. One that made sense to me was 'it is largely unstructured; begins with the experience, not principles or concepts; is more personal or individualized; may be unconsciously acquired and is usually more permanent' (p. 109). The remainder of part 2 examines research into experiential learning and how experiential and reflective learning are interrelated.

Part three is the resource manual. Here Moon pulls together her extensive practical experience in the field. She suggests how we might introduce reflective activities to learners, how to assess reflective writing, and how to enhance same. Several examples of reflective writing are reproduced, some of them truly fascinating.

Jennifer Moon has written several books and articles on reflection in learning. She writes in a clear style, and avoids the excessive use of educational jargon. Her explanations are carefully constructed, and the topics within the book are analyzed in depth, drawing on current and past research – the references number 301, and range from a 1971 work of Jean Piaget, Noel Entwistle's writings in the 1980s, to later books by learning theorists such as Guy Claxton.

This is an excellent book for academics who wish to increase their knowledge and understanding in the area, and for graduate students who are perhaps wanting to investigate experiential and reflective learning. Highly recommended.

Study Skills in English, 2nd Edition

Michael J. Wallace (2004). Cambridge University Press, 208 pp, £12.50 paperback with audio CD audio notetaking unit. ISBN: 0521533856.

Review by Noel Edge, College of Information Systems, Zayed University

This text addresses a range of study and communication skills that are critical to university students regardless of their chosen majors. The text has a distinct "procedural" and applied approach to a student's critical study skill set. I think it is a useful resource in all semesters of a baccalaureate program, but particularly in pre-major general education semesters. However, for my students using English as a second language, I would expect that the text could not be used successfully in a self-study mode as these students essentially lack the very skills they would need to use the text. The suggested approaches in this text, while sound and extremely useful, would need careful explanation by an instructor and repeated supervised practice by students to deliver the desired benefits.

This text, or similar, if adopted institute-wide, would have value for the academic programs in as much as these approaches could be reinforced in course after course. In this case, the value is not so much in the specific approaches and techniques adopted to reading, note taking, etc but rather in the standardization of methods that students will hopefully, and eventually, adopt through repeated use.

The text addresses the question of university study skills in six areas: reading, note taking, basic research, writing, oral work, and study management.

The reading skills chapter emphasizes the purposes of reading and proposed a “mind-mapping” approach to aid comprehension and understanding of the written English. Similarly for the chapters on note taking, oral learning and study organization. These chapters provide only a simple and brief introduction to the topics, so I would suggest, as an essential step, instructor lead sessions and repeated practice.

I view the two chapters on basic research and writing as very useful and relevant for students in all baccalaureate semesters. I would certainly use these chapters in at least two of my courses. I have a second semester course focusing on careers in the computer industry, and a final semester course where students are supervised for an independent research topic. These chapters provide a useful set of techniques that I could use with students at all levels to encourage them to adopt a more structured approach to their written work. Despite a formal introduction to information literacy and writing skills, with English as a second language and at best only “developing” written English skills, research and writing pose very significant challenges for my students. This text provides a host of ideas that can be easily incorporated into my courses to structure and direct the tasks for students. The research techniques chapter is a readymade 12-step procedure that students can be asked to follow and submit evidence (brainstorming mind-maps, sources, citation and plagiarism examples) of each of the twelve stages. A similar 12-step process leads students thought the writing phase and students can be asked to provide evidence (frames, signposting, proofing, drafting and re-drafting) as part of the peer review and final draft phases already employed.

Review by Timothy Walters, College of Communication and Media Sciences, Zayed University

Study Skills in English comprises six units (or chapters) covering basics in which all college students should be proficient before they enter their major. Skill sets examined include improving reading efficiency, taking notes, researching, and writing in an organized fashion. Student activity and realistic practical work are emphasized. The instructor’s text has helpful suggestions and discussion notes and an accompanying audio CD so that students can practice listening skills in a structured manner.

Because of its emphasis on fundamentals, *Study Skills in English* would make a useful contribution to an introductory level course no matter the subject matter. Indeed, the reading, researching, and writing skills taught would be valuable additions any course requiring students to read, write, and research efficiently and effectively.

While a quick easy read, well organized, and an extremely worthwhile investment, *Study Skills in English* has a few minor flaws. Some diagrams showing “how-two” processes are not intuitive and will need further explanation for ESL students. In addition, the last two units of the text, “Learning through discussions” and “Managing your studies,” are not as robust as are the others. Indeed the “Managing your studies” chapter seems not holistic, generally ignoring vital issues such as the social side of university life, particularly in the context of Gulf Arab states. The material presented in the chapter would benefit by being part of a larger block of study considering successful management of university life in general.

Nevertheless, the merits clearly outweigh the minor deficiencies. The unit on “Improving reading efficiency” discusses how to read college texts effectively and purposefully. As it does so, the chapter clearly articulates the difference between “careful and quick” reading and how to probe material quickly to decide its efficacy. Included in the well-constructed discussion are the purposes and roles of book parts such as the index, table of contents and the importance of first and last paragraphs and chapters. It also discusses how to use organizational markers in text to find needed materials.

The unit on “Note-taking skills” discusses getting the most from written and spoken output. In doing so, the discussion examines various modes of talking notes, using symbols to speed up the process, and finding “signposts” guiding you to the material you need. The text has a reasonably inclusive list of “discourse” markers such as “for example,” “nevertheless,” “then,” and “in addition,” among others and talks about how to use these to find what you want to know. While examining the note-taking as a four-step process (pre-listening, while listening, post-listening, and critical thinking), it reflects on developing an individual notetaking style and provides some listening practice to do so.

The “Basic research techniques” chapter contains an excellent summary of the research process. This ranges from beginning the process with a brain-storming session to where to go for important information, to choosing information, to avoiding that basic bugaboo, plagiarism. Techniques discussed are fundamentals such as identifying appropriate resources, using key words and Boolean logic, overcoming the too many, too few, or irrelevant hits conundrum, and how to quote properly. Several versions of plagiarism are presented so that students can learn the difference between what is proper and what is not. Also part of the discussion are how to create a reference list and develop an annotated bibliography.

The “Writing skills” section contains a writing assignment check list and a process of writing outline, combined with an excellent discussion about choosing subject matter and determining an organizational framework for a research paper. The organizational frames discussed with explicating diagrams would be suitable for most subject content areas. Lastly, the chapter contains a concise discussion of the writing process, moving the student from draft, to redraft, to proofreading, to final product.

In a more advanced learning environment, *Study Skills* should be introduced at the high-school level. In the context of the newly developing education systems, *Study Skills* should be mandatory for all students before they move from basics to programmatic course work. Thus, students should not only be required to take a course using this text, they should be given a reference copy for their personal library.

Review by Patricia Ryan abu-Wardeh, English Language Centre, Zayed University

The opening pages of this reading-skills book give cause for cheer, because this is just what the foundation course student and teacher need – a concise, portable handbook incorporating texts, tasks, answer key and full explanations in “one combined student-friendly text.” Overlooking the fact that the word ‘feedback’ is misused in the preface to the teacher – the explanations at the back of the book can hardly be defined as feedback to unseen student responses – I set to the task of reading the book with enthusiasm, in the expectation of finding much that would serve as fodder for my classes.

A useful feature is the list of learning outcomes at the beginning of each unit, although it would be better if it included the actual skills covered and headlined in the text. Also of interest are the tasks specifically designed to make learners aware of different learning styles, particularly necessary among students whose experience of learning has been mostly rote and memorization. Students hoping to enter academia will find the section on text organization, creating diagrams and outline notes especially relevant.

It is a pity that Unit 1, Improving Reading Efficiency, has what appears to be a printing error, resulting in a spell of quite inefficient reading. Some pages of a psychology book are reproduced, but the first priming question preceding the text asks about the author’s academic position. According to the contents, this should appear on page vii (About the author), which is nowhere to be found; moreover, the contents page and the preface seem to be reversed. The answer appears at the end of the last (reproduced) page.

Although the rubrics are clear and easy to follow, some of the tasks are too time and labour-intensive. There is a marked mis-match of rubrics and authentic texts (from academic books and specialist magazines such as the Economist), the latter being unnecessarily academic for a general course, with few concessions to non-native English-speaking students. This is fine when studying a major, where motivation is high, but this book is intended to teach skills, not content.

Also, rather than making reading accessible by easing the reader into academic discourse, the author has selected some quite turgid, if authentic, texts. Not for the faint-hearted. Even the Key is difficult to follow in places, although the book claims to be suitable for all students whose studies are through the medium of English, from native speaker to EFL learner. Having said that, the modeling that is provided in the Key section is an excellent way of enabling self-study, not to mention the time it saves for busy teachers.

One more gripe: improving reading speed is not mentioned in the outcomes or skills, yet the student is exhorted to “time yourself” and to work out reading speed from the Reading Speed chart at the end of the book. The problem is that in each case, the tasks and questions precede the reading; this surely will result in a false reading speed, as the student will be distracted by the tasks, seeking answers rather than reading straight through.

However, from here on, the book ‘takes off’. Unit 2 comes as a breath of fresh air, offering a wealth of guidance, hints and useful tasks on note-taking, from both written and oral sources - an essential skill but often neglected. As in Unit 1, the skills are presented and practised in a variety of ways, increasing the chances of maintaining student interest and achievement. The subsequent units cover most if not all of the study skills required by today’s student, increasingly a person who is exposed to ‘blended learning’, which exploits modern technology as well as traditional print sources. Thus the eager student can read about and practise doing research on the Web, and how to manage his or her studies to optimize the chances of success.

By the end of the book a student will have covered each of the four language skills: not only reading and listening, but also writing and speaking (learning through discussion, and presentation skills). Photocopiable checklists are a bonus, but one can’t help wondering why the subtext on the title page reads “A course in reading skills for academic purposes”. This book is really so much more.