

The Value of Introspection

Abstract

One definition of introspection is that it is “contemplation of one's own thoughts, feelings, and sensations; self-examination.”¹

Introspection comes into play in “Know what you know, know what you don't know, and know who knows what you don't know” and “When things are going really well you've probably missed something.”²

Introspection is valuable, important, and perhaps even critical to successful business operations. A prominent case dealing with this that my students and discuss is “What went wrong at Cisco Systems?”³ More recently, we have difficulties in the global financial and the American automobile industries that also suggest the lack of introspection.

This note takes up this characteristic – introspection – in more detail with some comments on its value, how it can be developed and applied.

Applicable to the Following Courses

All.

Introduction

The genesis of this note lies in my recent experiences with writing submitted in my online courses.

1. In too many cases the requirements of the assignment are not met.
2. In too many cases the contribution delivers low levels of value.
3. In too many cases the grammar and syntax is sufficiently poor as to hinder my ability to judge relevance and value.

Students face a choice when submitting assignments.

Submit the assignment and accept my assessment.

Or

Self-assess the submission. If the student is satisfied, submit; if not, amend and submit.

All I can ask of a student is that they do their best. Only they know if they have done their best. And the only way they can know if they have done their best is to make a self-assessment. That is, they are introspective.

¹ “introspection: Definition from Answers.com.”

² Drogan, “Drogon's Laws.”

³ Christopher, *Logistics and Supply Chain Management: Creating Value-added Networks*, 171-174

Approach

The rule is: "Read the assignment. Write your response. Reread the assignment. Read your response. Correct your response as required."

I think it reasonable that students accept the rule and responsibility for applying it on a consistent basis.

But they don't. It seems that the approach is to skim the assignment, dash off a response, and leave it to me to interpret what it is they meant. This is not, in my view, the kind of skill and consideration of others that is appreciated in the marketplace.

Hence, the need for introspection.

Introspection is not self-doubt or insecurity, but rather a desire to assure you have done all you can do to fulfill an obligation which has been placed on you.

Introspection is about learning. What worked? Where did I get suck? What will I do differently next time? ⁴

Introspection is about making yourself more valuable.

The Larger Picture

"Valujet Flight 592 was a flight that crashed on May 11, 1996 en route from Miami International Airport in Miami, Florida, United States, to William B. Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia.

...

Flight 592 disappeared from radar at 2:14 p.m. It crashed in Browns Farm Wildlife Management area in the Everglades, a few miles west of Miami, at speeds in excess of 500 miles per hour (800 km/h) Kubeck, Hazen, the three flight attendants, and all 105 passengers aboard were killed."⁵

'As a layman, I tend to lay much of the responsibility for the current economic messiness at the feet of well-paid "quants" developing elaborate economic models that, to my way of thinking, focus on minimizing risk and maximizing return, which is good, but at the expense of failing to understand the associated moral hazards, which is bad.'⁶

The consequences of lack of introspection in college are severe (failure of a class, failure to graduate, cancellation of the student visa), but in business the consequences can be quite severe, even fatal.

The place to explore and learn introspection is in an environment where the consequences are likely to be less severe.

Development

People will develop the skills that either interest them or that they see as necessary for success. I argue that introspection is one of these skills.

I suspect that in only a few cases do students perceive introspection as an important skill. Hence, its importance needs to be demonstrated.

Please read the following from "Writing a Self-Evaluation."⁷

'To be able to evaluate oneself fairly, candidly, and helpfully is a valuable life skill which will be an asset to you long after you leave college.'

⁴ Clark, "After Action Review."

⁵ Wikipedia, "Valuejet 592," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ValuJet_Flight_592 [June 30, 2009]

⁶ James Drogan, "The Morality of Mathematics," <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/droganbloggin/2008/3/23/the-morality-of-mathematics.html> [June 30, 2009]

⁷ The Washington Center's Evaluation Committee, "Sample Self-Evaluation Prompts."

There is no single way to write a good evaluation. That will depend upon the course, your goals, your style, and your needs. The advice below is only that, advice. Do not follow it slavishly or respond as if it were an outline to be followed. And do not assume that you must touch on all of the points mentioned. A good evaluation selects the most important results of the learning process, and from this selection much else is evident. Give time and thought to what you write and care to how you write. A sloppy, careless self-evaluation filled with misspellings, incomplete sentences, and half-thoughts leaves a poor final impression even if you did very well in a course of study.

A VITAL POINT: Try to write in a way which communicates information about the content of a course or independent study. Do not just speak in abstractions and personal feelings, such as "This class was extremely important to me because through discussion and the readings my thinking developed immensely." What subject? Which discussions? What did you read? think about what? Developed from where to where? A reader who does not know what the class studied should be able to gain an idea from your self-evaluation. One should be able to form some judgment about how well you understand a subject from what you say about it, not merely that you claim to understand it. In other words, BE SPECIFIC, BE SPECIFIC, BE SPECIFIC, BE SPECIFIC, BE SPECIFIC, and, finally, BE CONCRETE.

One of the important skills in a good education is being able to ask the right questions. Likewise, writing a good evaluation depends upon good questions. In fact, one might begin an evaluation by inquiring "What are the important questions about this subject?" listing several, and then discussing some good answers. There are many problems and issues which one might address to oneself in order to trigger a good evaluation. Here are some-suggestions only:

- Did I do more or less than was expected by the instructor? By me? Why, or why not?
- This is a ____credit class, or about ____ of my study time this quarter. Did I give it that much time?
- What do I now understand best about this subject? Least well?
- My strongest and weakest points as a student? What did I do to improve the weak points? What will I do next?
- What do I need to learn next about this subject?
- What was most satisfying about the class? Most frustrating? Your responsibility for each?
- Has the course irritated you? Stimulated you? Touched you personally? Has it made you uncomfortable about yourself, about society, about the future, about learning? Are you the same person who began the class ten weeks ago? What's different?
- What did you expect to learn? What did you actually learn? More or less, and why?

... former Fairhaven dean Phil Ager...he argues, there are at least four different kinds of learning:

- Cognitive. Your new understandings and knowledge? What is the most important single piece of knowledge gained? What will you remember in a year? Five years? How has your knowledge grown? Changed? Become more sound?
- Skills. New skills gained? Old skills improved? Your ability to solve problems, think, reason, research? Did you actually use these skills? What skills do you need to develop next?
- Judgment. Do you understand the difference between process and content? Can you apply principles? To other classes? Life? If you took the class again, what would you do differently? Has your way of thinking changed?
- Affective. (emotions and feelings) Did you change? Your beliefs? Values? Was the class worth your time? Do you feel good about it? the single most important thing you learned about you? Evaluate your participation in discussion. Did you discuss and learn

with other students? How has the course altered your behavior? Did you grow? Shrink? Stagnate? Float?

Suggestions to Students for Writing Self-evaluation

It helps to write evaluations in two stages. The first stage is really for yourself. So you can get things straight in your own head without worrying yet about what to write for the second stage: a transcript document aimed at the outside world. For the first stage, write quickly, loosely, and as much as possible without stopping. Don't even worry about mechanics, organization, or whether it makes sense. Don't even worry about whether it is true: sometimes blatant exaggeration or distortion is the only way to get your hands on a half-buried insight. The idea is to get your thoughts and feelings down on paper where you can see them and learn from them.

Wait until AFTER you get that interesting mess written before going back over it to decide which things are true and which of those true things you want to share with strangers who will read your transcript. It will be easier to write appropriately for a transcript reader when you get the false and private things down on paper so they don't make fog and static in your head to confuse and slow you down.

Save this first-stage writing for your portfolio. It will have lots of important insights that won't be in your transcript. Think about sharing much or all of it with your faculty member so as to help him or her write a better, fairer evaluation of you.

Useful Questions for Your First-Stage Self-Evaluation

- How do you feel now at the end?
- How accurate are those feelings?
- What are you proud of?

Compare your accomplishments with what you hoped for and expected at the start.

- Did you work hard or not? Get a lot done or not?
- What kinds of things were difficult or frustrating? Which were easy?
- What's the most important thing you did this period?
- What bits of reading or lecture stick in your mind?
- Think of some important moments from this learning period: your best moments, worst moments, typical moments, crises or turning points. Tell five or six of these in a sentence or two each.
- What can you learn or did you learn from each of these moments?
- Write a letter to an important person you studied, thanking the person for what you learned. Or telling the person how you disagree. Or telling the person how good a job he or she did.
- Who is the person you studied you cared most about? BE that person and write that person's letter to you, telling you whatever it is the person has to tell you.
- What did you learn throughout? skills and ideas. What was the most important thing? What idea or skill was hardest to really "get?" What crucial idea or skill just came naturally?
- When they make the movie, who will play you? What's the movie really about?
- Describe this period as a journey: To where? What kind of terrain? Is it a complete trip or part of a longer one?
- You learned something crucial which you won't discover for a while. Guess it now.

- Tell a few ways you could have done a better job.
- What knowledge and skills will you need in five years? Did you learn any?
- What advice would some friends in the program give you if they spoke with 100 percent honesty and caring?
- What advice do you have for yourself?

Questions to Answer in Your Transcript Self-Evaluation

- What did you do? Faculty members will include an official program description as part of your transcript, so you don't need to tell the core activities and reading. Just say whether you did them and go on to tell briefly the things you did that weren't part of the required core. Which activities were most important to you? You can cover this whole question briefly in a few sentences unless there is some complicating factor or a special reason to go into more detail.
- What did you learn? skills and content. This is probably the main thing they need to know. And you probably know more than your teacher about what you learned. Tell a whole bunch of things briefly-perhaps just a list of bare phrases. But then zero in on at least one or two important ideas or skills and tell about them in some detail. IN effect, this part of your evaluation is a micro-essay-only a paragraph or two-that explains something you know. The bare list of things you learned is a TELLING to the readers, which they must take on faith; here you are SHOWING readers something you know and thereby proving it.
- What was the learning process like for you?
- What does it all add up to for you? Where did you come from, and where are you going?

Things to Keep in Mind

You are writing for strangers and officials: employers or admissions officers or faculty members at another school. Writing to official strangers sometimes freezes the words inside you so you can't write at all or else turns them to plastic so they come out all fake, bureaucratic, and untrustworthy. It may help to write as though you are writing a letter to a friend, loved one, teacher, or to yourself. This will not only help you to write more easily, it will also help your writing have some voice and sound like it comes from a real person. In revising, you can make whatever small changes may be necessary to fit your official audience but still keep the real voice in your writing.

Illustrate your generalizations with brief examples. You can get an event into half a sentence ("such as when I . . .").

Tell things you are proud of. If you cannot think of any, think again. They are there. But also try to describe those parts of your performance that you are not satisfied with; or things you need to work on in the future; or things you would have done differently if you knew then what you know now. You are likely to sound dumb or dishonest if you cannot think of some things you could do better on the basis of experience.

Don't complain about how terrible the program or teachers were. It'll just sound like sour grapes and make readers think you blame things on others and don't accept responsibility for your own learning. Save those complaints for evaluations of program and faculty. If the complaints keep sneaking into your self-evaluation, stop and do a draft of your program and faculty evaluations. Get the complaints out of your system so you can focus your energies on what counts here: your learning.

Keep it short. Most transcript readers won't be used to reading these long complicated Evergreen transcripts and will be in a hurry. Cut out what isn't crucial. Tell the readers that if they want to know more, you have a portfolio to show them with longer descriptions of your

learning and examples of your actual work. (And make sure you have one.) But don't be afraid to let them get a feel of you. You will come across strongest if you come across real. They need to trust you. The best way I know is to try hard for the real truth and to let yourself sound like a real person.

Don't type your transcript evaluation on the official form without getting feedback on a draft of it from your faculty member and at least one other student: what seems right and wrong? How does the writing strike them? The best way to get feedback is to get them to describe the person they find in the self-evaluation. Get them also to help you with awkward writing and mistakes in mechanics.

When you finally type it on the official form be sure to proofread it carefully and get someone else who is a good proofreader. Some transcript readers will be more influenced by mistakes in mechanics and typing and messiness than by anything else.

Assignment for Use in Writing Classes

Post-write

Now that you have finished your essay, please answer the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions: we are interested in your analysis of your experience writing this essay.

1. What problems did you face during the writing of this essay?
2. What solutions did you find for those problems?
3. What alternative plans for this essay did you consider? Why did you reject them?
4. Imagine you had more time to write this essay. What would you do if you were to continue working on it?
5. Rank 1 to 4 according to priority the following elements of composition in your revision plans, with 1 most important and 4 least important:
 - development of your thesis
 - organization of your essay
 - address to your intended audience
 - formation of your paragraphs and sentences'

Now I admit there is a lot in this, but the idea is not that you should memorize all of it or even use all of it in developing your ability to be introspective. Rather, I provide this to provoke your thinking.

Honesty and Intensity

It is human nature to assess yourself differently than assessing others. We see examples of this all around us every day. In fact, there are so many examples that it becomes easy for us to think this as acceptable behavior.

I caution against this. The Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you," is still a good credo to live by.

Effective introspection requires honesty with yourself. Recognizing your weaknesses as well as strengths, and your reach versus grasp in an honest and straightforward way is essential to effective introspection.

"Know what you know, know what you don't know, and know who knows what you don't know."⁸

⁸ Drogan, "Drogan's Laws."

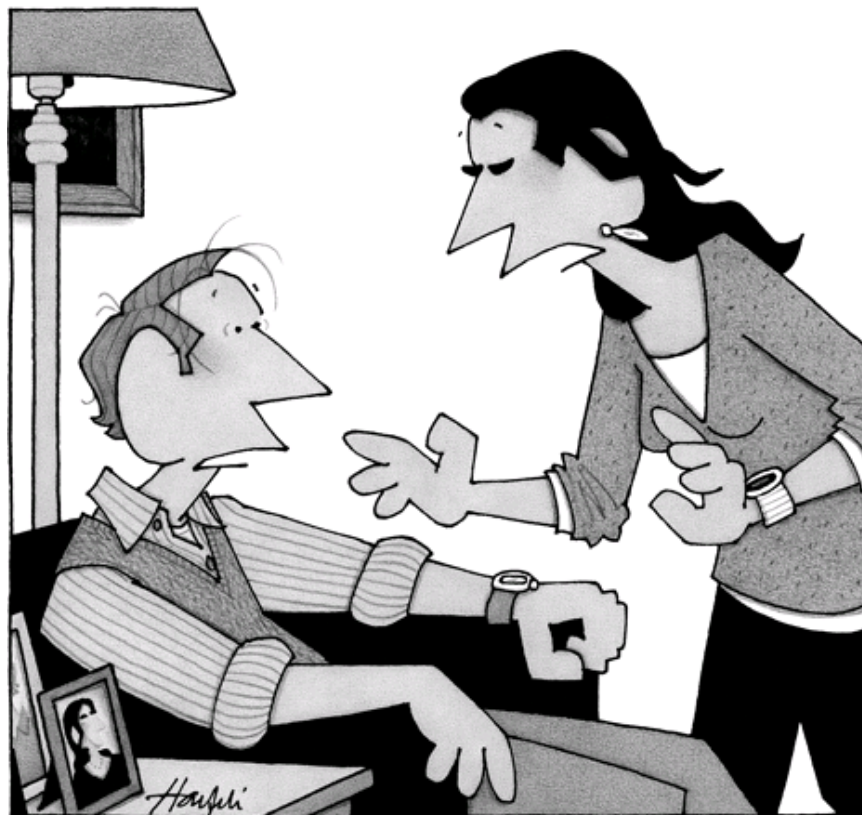
There are, in my experience, times when you are unable to be as honest with yourself as you might like. Honesty sometimes requires enormous strength of character which you may simply not have on a specific day as regards to a specific situation. My advice is to find someone who can be honest with you and engage with them.

In the consulting business there is the Law of the Five Whys, an approach to determining the root cause of an observed effect.⁹ Here's where the intensity comes into play. It's often easy to take the first answer that comes ones way when that answer may not be that required to resolve the situation. One has to fight through this temptation. I'm not suggesting here that it always takes five whys to get to the root cause, but rather that one needs to dig until the fundamental reason is found.

Softness in honesty and intensity are often reasons why consultants are hired.

Coda

This note has argued in opposition to this cartoon from the New Yorker.¹⁰



"You should never engage in unsupervised introspection."

Supervised introspection cedes responsibility for your affairs to others. This is not, in my view, something you ought to do.

Start small. Be introspective, say, of a single class. Discuss this with a classmate or even (gulp) the professor. Do it again and again until you get comfortable. Then move up to a larger matter, say the course as a whole.

⁹ "The Five Whys."

¹⁰ Anon. Cartoons from the Issue of July 27th, 2009 : The New Yorker.
http://www.newyorker.com/humor/issuecartoons/2009/07/27/cartoons_20090720?slide=5#showHeader. [July 23, 2009]

To repeat some of my opening lines in this note.

Introspection is not self-doubt or insecurity, but rather a desire to assure you have done all you can do to fulfill an obligation which has been placed on you.

Introspection is about learning. What worked? Where did I get suck? What will I do differently next time?

Introspection is about making yourself more valuable.

James Drogan
August 17, 2009

Bibliography

- Christopher, M. *Logistics and Supply Chain Management: Creating Value-added Networks*. Harlow, England ; New York: FT Prentice Hall, 2005.
- Clark, Donald. "After Action Review." *Big Dog & Little Dog's Performance Juxtaposition*, November 29, 2008. <http://www.skagitwatershed.org/~donclark/leader/leadaar.html>.
- Drogan, J. "Drogan's Laws." <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/drogans-laws/>.
- "introspection: Definition from Answers.com." *Answers.com*.
<http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery?sm1=VGhlfZhbHVlIG9mEludHJvc3BIY3Rpb24g&fw=3&fc=6&ss=-1&es=-1&gwp=11&ver=2.4.0.651&method=1>.
- "The Five Whys." *Wikipedia*, July 28, 2009. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_why.
- The Washington Center's Evaluation Committee. "Sample Self-Evaluation Prompts." *Assessment in and of Collaborative Learning*. <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/e3.html>.