REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

A Teaching Community Reflects On Reflective Writing In Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Reflective writing is widely recognised as a tool to enhance students' learning and professional practice. Underpinning this approach is a number of pedagogical and cognitive frameworks that are capable of encouraging deep and active learning. However, in implementing reflective writing, one major challenge frequently raised by teachers is the difficulty in drawing critical and higher-level responses from the students. The stakes are raised when reflective writing becomes part of the assessment modes in classroom learning. In this paper, we present a teaching community's reflection on reflective writing. The dataset comprises collective responses gathered from participants of a colloquium on Teaching and Learning in Residential Colleges (TLRC) through a classroom response system and small group discussions. We explore the extent to which teachers in Residential Colleges (RCs) utilise reflective writing in their classes, the challenges they face, and the best practices gleaned over years of experience.

Keywords: Reflection, metacognition, residential college, living and learning programme

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is the cornerstone of many learning theories. Dewey (1910) for example, viewed reflective thinking as an active and careful consideration of a belief or knowledge that complements learning experiences. Without reflection, experiences alone can produce a lack of sensitivity and responsiveness in the learner. Glenn and Nelson (1988) further suggested that it is only when the experience is thoughtfully considered and analysed that generalisations are formed to influence future action. This crucial link between experiences and reflection prompted learning theorists to integrate reflexivity into contemporary learning cycles.

To facilitate reflection, learners are often asked to document their experiences to deepen personal understanding and stimulate critical thinking (Ballantyne & Packer, 1995; Wraae et al., 2020). Reflective writing is thus extensively used in higher education (Smith, 2011), where it serves as a pedagogical tool to link theory to practice. In more practice-oriented disciplines, such as healthcare and education, reflective writing allows learners to critically evaluate their own work and to take a more active role in their professional accountability (Calderhead, 1988). In one example, Bain et al. (1999) found that reflective writing alone was able to bring about significant cognitive benefits for learners, even without the intensive involvement of a reflective supervisor.

The benefits of reflective writing have prompted teachers to examine how this pedagogical tool can be developed further to promote deeper learning. For example, the typology of reflective writing developed by Valli (1997) enabled teachers to readily link the style of writing to the intended learning outcomes so as to shape learner instruction and assessment (Table 1), while Krember et. al. (2008)'s categorisation—habitual action/non-reflection, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection—aimed to guide students' reflective writing. These classifications aided teachers in analysing their students' work so that they could develop techniques that encourage deeper reflection (Minott, 2008).

Table 1

Description of Valli's (1997) typology of reflective writing and our elaboration of the intended learning objectives

Typology	*Description*	*Intended learning objective*
Technical reflection	Learners match their performance to external guidelines	Intended to benchmark performance to improve practice
Reflection-in and on-action	Learners justify their actions or thoughts made during or after the event	Intended to evaluate the assumptions, values and beliefs underpinning their decisions
Personalistic reflection	Learners examine their relationship with others and personal growth.	Intended to evaluate their emotions and cognition in relation to the experience
Critical reflection	Learners evaluate the social, moral, and political dimensions of the experience	Intended to rationalise the dimensions to ethical criteria
Deliberative reflection	Learners compare differing viewpoints and research related to a range of concerns	Intended to relate their beliefs, values and experience to broader perspectives

To date, the majority of the literature has focused on the impact of this reflective writing on student learning. However, few have documented the teachers' reflections. In this reflective piece, we reflect on our teaching practice to examine our experience with implementing reflective writing, and analyse the results of a poll of

participants at a recent teaching and learning colloquium. Specifically, we were keen to analyse how and why reflective writing was used, the challenges teachers faced, and if they have effective practices that could be shared with the rest of the teaching community.

CONTEXT

To examine how the residential colleges' (RCs) teaching community uses reflective writing to elicit different aspects of learning in their classes, we gathered responses from participants of a colloquium on Teaching and Learning in Residential Colleges (TLRC) held in NUS. Over 60 teachers attended this colloquium, with two-thirds of the participants teaching in the RCs and the rest from other units in the university. Using the classroom response system, Poll Everywhere, provided by the university's Centre for Instructional Technology (CIT), the participants responded anonymously to the following questions:

1. Do you include reflective writing in your module?
2. If yes, what do you call it?
3. What are your goals of including reflective writing assignments in your module?
4. What are your students' reactions about reflective writing assignments?
5. What is the total weightage of all the reflective writing assignments in your module?
6. Do you use a grading rubric?
7. How effective is the rubric in helping you assess the reflective writing?

In the poll, there were a total of 38 participants with an average response rate of 86% across the seven questions. In addition, we asked the teachers to share in small groups (six to eight in a group), their *challenges* and *best practices* in implementing reflective writing in their classes. All participants were informed before the poll that their responses were voluntary and anonymous, and that the collective responses would be analysed and shared with the teaching community after the colloquium. A copy of the presentation and poll results was circulated after the colloquium to all TLRC participants and Department Ethics Review Committee's approval was obtained (FRP21-002).

TEACHING COMMUNITY'S REFLECTION

Reflective writing is widely used to achieve different learning outcomes but implementation is challenging

Most participants indicated that reflective writing was included as part of their modules (85%, total response = 35), using a wide range of terms to describe this pedagogical tool. Broadly, there were three main types of reflective writing used by participants. The most commonly used term is "reflection" and its associated variations such as "reflective piece", "reflective assignment", and "reflective journal" (44%, total response = 58), that implied a broader scope of topics that students can deliberate upon. Reflective writing that focused more on students' personal learning and growth throughout the module tended to include terms such as "personal reflection" and "learning journey" (21%), while those that focused on the critical evaluation of issues tended to include terms such as "critical reflection", "critique", "analysis of experience", and "response" (21%). Other unique terms such as "blogs", "storytelling", and "photo reflection essay" (12%) were also used to promote student reflection.

In our poll, it was also apparent that the objectives of using reflective writing were more varied than the terms used to describe the assignment. Student-centric aims or learning outcomes constitute the majority of these objectives. Most participants would like their students to develop skills such as "critical thinking",

"analytical skills", "synthesis of ideas", and "writing skills" (27%, total response = 66). A significant proportion (26%) aims to deepen learning by "developing metacognition" and "promoting internalisation". The participants would also like to prompt students to relate to a broader context (12%) by "connecting the dots" while "engaging" and "applying" the content to their personal life. Lastly, participants would like to use reflective writing as a means to document students' "personal growth" through "self-discourse" and "reviewing their own perspectives" (11%).

On the other hand, the teacher-centric aims were primarily to use reflective writing to obtain students' "feedback on learning" (11%) and "assessment" (6%). Some participants also used reflective writing as a teaching tool (6%) to promote "active" and "self-directed learning".

Given the diversity of terms and learning outcomes for reflective writing, the participants recognised the need to clearly communicate the expectations to students. However, they also highlighted during the group discussion that "clear guidelines are difficult to develop". This is partly because instructions have to strike a balance between providing sufficient details in the form of "guiding questions" and "specific details", and not being "overly prescriptive" at the same time. This broad guideline is needed to "allow for 'free flow' creative writing" but students may "misunderstand the meaning of critical reflection and the need to go beyond descriptive writing", while others are "unable to differentiate essay writing and reflective writing".

Most teachers use reflective writing as formative assessment but grading is challenging

In our poll, 84% of the participants (total response = 32) assigned a grade to the reflective writing assignment. Of these, 41% assigned more than 20% of the total weightage to this assignment, 28% assigned between 11 to 20%, and 16% assigned between 1 to 10%.

Participants also noted during the small group discussion that "graded and non-graded reflections have different stakes". On one hand, grading helps the students and teachers treat reflection seriously and purposefully, lest they feel that it is "extra work" and reflective writing loses its value (Crème, 2005). Formal assessments can also guide the student in achieving the intended learning outcomes and enable teachers to examine the student's level of reflexivity. Conversely, reflections are often viewed as deeply personal and students may struggle to reconcile how the teacher can accurately assess what is "on their mind" (Crème, 2005). In the small group discussions, the participants remarked that it was difficult to distinguish if their students' writing was truly "authentic" or were their "students writing what they think the teachers want to hear".

To ensure the parity of the grading and overcome the "difficulty in grading reflections", 75% of the participants used a grading rubric (total response = 32). Of these, the majority felt that it was "effective" or "very effective" (64%, total response = 25), while 32% felt it was "somewhat effective" and 4% felt it was "not effective at all". Some participants highlighted during the small group discussions that a rubric "may be a double-edged sword" that can be a "tool for fairness" or "reduce students' creativity and diversity of responses obtained". Particularly for criterion-referenced rubrics, the participants found it hard to develop a rubric that strikes the balance between "enabling learning and providing a checklist".

Consequently, when the participants were asked about their perceptions of students' reaction towards reflective writing, it seemed that there was a lukewarm response among the students (total response = 34). Most felt that the students were "slightly enthusiastic" (65%), 18% responded that their students were "enthusiastic" and an equal proportion indicated that their students were "not at all enthusiastic". None of the participants indicated their students were "very enthusiastic". In the small group discussions, participants highlighted that some "students do not see the value and purpose" of reflective writing and were

"unmotivated and find the assignment boring". In some instances, students may view reflective writing as "a different 'animal' from academic writing" and "not a serious learning assignment".

AUTHORS' REFLECTION AND SUGGESTIONS

Alignment of learning objectives and assignment brief to facilitate the implementation of reflective writing

Our review of the literature corroborated with the findings from the poll in that the terms used to describe reflective writing are exceedingly diverse. The University of New South Wales Learning Centre (UNSW, 2020) for example, uses terms such as "journal", "learning diary", "reflective note", and "self-assessment". The problem is accentuated in multidisciplinary learning environments, such as that in the RCs, where students in the Life Sciences are more familiar with laboratory "logbooks" and technical reports, while those in the Humanities and Social Sciences are more comfortable with "critical response" and "personal reflection" to document personal growth. With the plethora of terms used in reflective writing, these terms are not intuitive and may result in a mismatch of teacher-student expectations (Crème, 2005).

In response to this challenge, participants highlighted best practices such as "clear guidelines", "guiding questions" and "exemplars" to facilitate higher levels of reflection. While some participants may hesitate to provide detailed instructions for reflective writing, Ash et al. (2005) emphasised that the intentional and purposeful linking of reflection to assessment is pivotal in bringing about greater achievement of the intended learning outcomes. Hume (2009) further noted that the introduction of specific questions facilitated higher levels of reflection but when her students were writing freely, there was an overall inclination to revert to lower levels.

Therefore, we suggest three steps that can aid teachers in crafting the assignment instructions: 1) identify the assignment's learning objectives, 2) align it to at least one category in the reflective writing typology, and 3) describe the scope of the reflection using keywords recommended by the typology. An illustration of how this can be achieved can be found in Figure 1.

Original instruction:

- The personal reflection report should be based on clarity, relevance, analysis, interconnections and self-criticism of the field trip.
- Reflections should be supplemented by readings and references.
- Reflections are to be 500 to 800 words long.

Revised instruction:

- The objective of this *critical reflection* is to *rationalise* the observations made during your field trip experience
- You should *relate* your field trip experience to the *broader social dimension* and *scientific concepts* taught in this module
- Thereafter, you should *evaluate* these observations based on your personal beliefs and understanding of the issue, supplemented by relevant references.
- Reflections are to be 500 to 800 words long.

Figure 1. An example of how instructions for reflective writing can be revised to enhance reflectivity.

Adopt a developmental approach to rubric construction to facilitate grading of reflective writing

To overcome the challenges of grading reflective writing, we suggest that teachers adopt a developmental approach to enhance the effectiveness of the rubric. One example would be to use the Structure of Observed Learning Outcome **(**SOLO) taxonomy as the foundation of rubric construction (Biggs & Collis, 1982). In doing so, it allows teachers to assess student work, describe strategies that demonstrate achievement, and use reflective writing as a tool for providing and receiving feedback. Such an approach was found to be more consistent in scoring severity and leniency compared to standard criterion referenced scales not supported by any learning taxonomies (Cetin & Ilhan, 2017). Furthermore, the description of the rubric focuses on the learning outcome and therefore allows the student to explore a range of topics creatively within the reflective piece.

Our next suggestion is to leverage on a typology for reflective writing (e.g. Valli 1997 and Krember et al., 2008**)** so that teachers can distinguish different levels of reflexivity in student work to facilitate grading. In doing so, we could readily compare the depth of the reflection among students to support assessment and it allows us to critically examine our students' learning. However, it is crucial to note that while typologies can appear hierarchical, teachers should not value some forms of reflection more than others (Spaulding & Wilson, 2002). Therefore, we emphasise that the level of reflexivity expected should be aligned to the learning objectives for the assignment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reflective writing builds on the foundation of a meaningful learning experience and therefore, a curriculum that integrates both reflection and experience will maximise student learning. Beyond the classroom, reflective writing can also improve programme assessment and faculty development within the institution (Allan & Driscoll, 2014). However, the implementation of reflective writing can be challenging, especially in a multidisciplinary learning environment. We would like to encourage educators to align reflective writing to the learning objectives in their classrooms and support students through intentional guidance and differentiated instruction.

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