

The form, meaning and purpose of university level assessed reflective writing

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Reflective writing, characterised by self-reference and evaluative commentary, is becoming an increasingly important genre in British universities. Although it is often associated with professional training because there is a particular need for reflective practitioners in work situations where unpredictable and irreversible events take place (Squires 2005), reflective writing tasks are now commonly set in a wide range of UK university departments, both pure and applied.

A major aim of reflective writing is to provide opportunities for Personal Development Planning (PDP), thus supporting national initiatives to encourage young people to 'reflect on their own learning, performance and/or achievement' and 'plan for their personal, educational and career development' (Higher Education Academy, 2005). Apart from assisting students to become more reflective, PDP can also be used to provide alternative evidence of student learning, when employers need to differentiate between apparently equally well qualified graduates.

PDP is a cyclical process of planning ahead for future action, working on tasks, and recording what has been learnt and achieved. It also involves evaluating personal achievements and considering ways to improve performance, and this second element poses the greater challenge to students because it requires them to write honestly about themselves. Many disciplines have traditionally discouraged personal and subjective writing. Indeed, "the fact that reflective writing involves paying attention to the experience of the writer as a practitioner can make it seem incompatible with deeply held views about, for example, legitimate modes of academic enquiry and the nature of 'evidence'" (Warwick University Centre for Academic Practice, 2006). Moreover, the purpose of much academic writing is to persuade the reader of the validity of a given argument, whereas truly reflective writing is often critical of the writer's own thoughts and actions, and does not put a positive gloss on personal mistakes or limitations. Thus reflection in writing is both unfamiliar and potentially risky; it could be argued that the more personal reflection a text contains, the less it conforms to academic norms, and the greater the risk that the writer will lose the reader's esteem.

According to the Higher Education Academy, PDP is most effective when it is integrated within mainstream academic pursuits, linked to the learning objectives and outcomes of academic programmes, and supported and endorsed by lecturers and HE institutions. In other words, it works best when it is embedded within disciplinary practice, when it is perceived to be an integral part of academic study rather than just a paper exercise, and when it is not the sole responsibility of personal tutors concerned with student welfare rather than academic progression.

Some reflective writing activities, such as personal notes, time-planning schedules, weblogs and reflective journals, are not formally assessed. Reader access to these kinds of texts can be restricted by the writer, making them an ideal repository for honest reflection but unsuitable as a means of evidencing student learning, or monitoring the development of personal development planning skills. Thus, in the hope of obtaining proof that students are reflecting on their learning, departments often make reflective writing both compulsory and subject to some form of assessment. A wide variety of

assessed reflective writing tasks have been identified as part of our ESRC-funded project to investigate genres of student writing¹, including:

- **reflective prologues** to *dramatised dissertations* (Law)
- **reflective commentaries** accompanying *literature reviews* (Health Studies, Anthropology), and *creative rewriting* (English Studies)
- **diaries** reflecting on *practical sessions* (Archaeology), *teamwork* (Business, Occupational Therapy), *patient care* (Occupational Therapy) and *overseas visits* (Engineering, Medicine)
- **authors' assessments** of projects (Mechanical Engineering)
- sections labelled **learning process / strategy learning review / key learning moments / development of knowledge and understanding** (Business)
- **annexes** critiquing the authors' own approach (Business)
- **feedback** sections (Computer Science)
- **self-reflection tasks** following *responses to a series of questions* (Computer Science)
- **final sections of multi-part tasks** (Manufacturing, Medicine)

Students may be required to write an entire assignment reflecting on their past personal experiences (“A medical student faced with the three suicide bombings of Cairo in April 2005”) or future ambitions (“What sort of doctor do I want to be by the year 2020?”). Alternatively, and apparently more commonly, a reflective section is required at the beginning or end of a longer assessed assignment, perhaps marked as a ‘commentary’, ‘feedback’ or ‘conclusion’.

Not all departments provide clear criteria for assessing reflective writing, and such criteria are anyway difficult to apply - there is no certain way of knowing whether a student's professed reflection is sincere or invented. Given the unfamiliarity of the reflective task, and the risk entailed in exposing one's own weaknesses, there is an obvious danger that students will go through the motions of appearing to reflect, without actually revealing much about their own thought processes or feelings. Some of the contributors to the BAWE corpus² used reflective sections to comment on the ease or difficulty of a task that had been set, for example, without discussing their reasons for this response:

this was difficult....

the skull sutures were quite easy...'

Archaeology *Diary of practical sessions* (6033g)

This database did not seem right for what I am doing. I also found it very complicated and confusing to use

Anthropology *Library Exercise* (3027a)

Others provided only a minimal response which cast their activities in a positive light:

Now that I have finished my assignment, I aim not just to understand the concepts and views of a particular model but to understand its application and usefulness in the real world.

Reflection on Shell's stakeholder approach (0253d)

In conclusion the presentation gave me additional insight in understanding the model.....

¹ 'An Investigation of Genres of Assessed Writing in British Higher Education', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (project number RES-000-23-0800).

² The British Academic Written English corpus, developed as part of 'An Investigation of Genres of Assessed Writing in British Higher Education' <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/bawe>

Reflection on Hofstede's cultural dimension (0253c)

Nevertheless there are texts in the BAWE corpus which indicate greater preparedness to explore personal development. Some students admitted their confusion about academic expectations, as in the following extract:

I found it difficult to draw the line between what is acceptable to discuss in an academic way, and what is not.

Computer Science: *Feedback* (6101c)

A few were brave enough to query assumptions underlying their course of study, as in the two following comments:

From someone who has spent several years studying the use of Information Technology to further competitive advantage in business the sharing of ideas, computer code, and resources with customers, peers, and indeed competitors seemed a baffling concept.

Computer Science: *essay* (6108i)

Reading the Dilbert cartoons in numbers reminded me of my initial doubts about this course and the idea of strategy being an academic discipline – waffling about great paradigms and models without end and leaving it to someone else to execute.

Business: *Key Learning Moments* (0206e)

Even in these two examples, however, the writers were careful to indicate that their doubts were initial responses, later to be modified to conform more closely to the accepted departmental view.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the most apparently genuine reflection in the corpus was produced in health related disciplines (Health Care, Counselling, Occupational Therapy, Mental Health Practice etc.). These subjects attract mature students with less immediate prior experience of academic study. The medical students who contributed to our corpus, on the other hand, were amongst the least likely to reveal their innermost thoughts, despite the fact that reflective sections were built into many of their writing tasks. In this excerpt, for example, the student simply reports on approved practice rather than discussing personal development:

Once the patient has been stabilised, further investigations should be performed...

Case notes: *Impact on your learning* (0047b)

Assigning reflective writing tasks may help to encourage reflection, but this is not to say that students who do not record their reflections do not reflect. Perhaps students can be trained to produce the kind of reflective pieces that tutors purportedly require, but ultimately whether or not to reveal one's hopes, doubts and fears to a tutor is a personal decision that the student alone must make, and that academic tutors have to respect.

References

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