

An evaluation of a reflective writing assessment within the MPharm programme

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this evaluation was to gain some insight into how students and academic staff engage with the reflective process through a written assignment.

Description of assessment: First year students write a short, summative reflective account about an inter-professional education (IPE) experience which is marked against specific outcomes.

Method: A random sample of 22 of the 165 marked reflective assignments from first year MPharm students were thematically examined to determine how the student demonstrates reflective learning and development. This was followed up with a meeting of academic staff involved in the marking of the assignment to explore the academic perspective on marking reflective work.

Evaluation: Students overall were competent at describing the situation itself but tended to make broad generalisations about the IPE experience rather than personalising it in a reflective process. Academic staff highlighted the challenges associated with using assessment criteria in a written assignment designed to demonstrate a personalised, reflective response.

Future work: The evaluation has underlined the potential benefit of using a cyclical approach as proposed by Kolb (1984) or Gibbs (1988) to the assessment process, rather than a grid-based criterion referenced format. Currently an innovative assignment marking scheme is being piloted using a continuing professional development cycle format.

Keywords: *assessment, reflective assignment, reflective learning*

Introduction

There are considerable differences in the academic perception of the function and value of reflective learning. There have been numerous attempts to define the practice of reflection. In its simplest sense reflection can be described as thinking about something you did and evaluating how well it went. A more complex definition from Biggs and Tang (2011) describes reflection in terms of transformative action - the vision of what you might be. The literature supports different reflective approaches, but Hargreaves (2004) maintains that there remains to be a lack of clear academic preference or educational evidence for one model. This evident lack of consistency can thus cause confusion for the undergraduate and unintentionally undermine the usefulness of a reflective activity. Boud *et al.* (1998) explains that in order for the practice of reflection to be successful it needs to be given increased status otherwise it will not be completed; therefore there must be clear learning outcomes so that the value of the activity of reflection can be appreciated.

Through the achievement of a fuller understanding of the theory behind reflective practice and its use as a learning activity, the academic can become better placed to guide the undergraduate. Hargreaves (2004) looked at how reflection can be assessed, the limitations this brought and identified three distinct categories of assessment

summarised as cognitive, professional competence and personal (emotion-led). These approaches can be linked to critical awareness, continuing professional development and a formative reflective journal respectively. The main aim of the evaluation of this written reflective work was to gain some insight into how students engage with the reflective process and improve their understanding of how reflection is used in professional practice. This evaluation also aimed to determine how members of academic staff perceived this assignment and if academic assessment of student reflection is appropriate.

Description of assessment method

Inter-professional Education (IPE) takes place throughout the undergraduate pharmacy degree and is defined as activity 'when two or more professionals learn about, from and with each other to enable effective collaboration and improve health outcomes' (CAIPE, 2002). Learning placements take place with students and practitioners representing other health care professionals and service users. In the first year students attend two, three hour IPE events concerned with developing teamwork and communication skills and were asked to write a short (650-750 words) summative reflective

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account. The IPE activities involve students from medicine, nursing, social work and pharmacy in team building exercises and the discussion of specific cases using specific resources such as case notes. The exercises were designed to encourage students to demonstrate the potential for each professional group to work together to contribute to improved patient outcomes. The written account was marked against seven outcomes, three being reflective and the other four based on more formal academically recognised outcomes, such as evidence of relevant reading, completeness in the accuracy of the account, structure and writing style. The three outcomes specifically related to reflective practice are:

1. Analysis and Evaluation
2. Identification of personal learning
3. Action plan for personal development

Each outcome is graded as 'Beginning', 'Developing', 'Competent' or 'Proficient' and overall the reflective piece of work is then marked as 'Pass' or 'Fail'. A summary of the descriptors used for the three reflective outcomes is provided in Table I. The other four outcomes were not considered in this evaluation as they do not relate directly to reflection. To pass the assignment no more than two of the seven outcomes must be deemed to be at the 'Beginning' stage. Students are prepared for reflective writing and introduced to the assessment criteria by a series of activities including an introductory lecture, a study workbook and optional reflective writing workshops. A total of 147 students passed the assignment at the first attempt from a cohort of 165, representing a pass rate of 89%. Members of academic staff were provided with detailed documentation and guidance to support the assessment process for this assignment.

Table I: Summary of reflective outcomes and descriptors used in the marking scheme

Reflective outcomes assessed	Beginning	Developing	Competent	Proficient
Analysis and evaluation	Purely descriptive. No analysis or evaluation	Mostly descriptive. Limited analysis and/or evaluation	Adequate balance between description, analysis and evaluation	Good balance between description, analysis and evaluation
Identification of personal learning	Account is entirely descriptive. No personal response	Account is mostly descriptive but limited evidence of personal response	Adequate evidence of personal response	Substantial evidence of personal response
Action plan for personal development	No personal response to the learning experience	Limited personal response to the learning experience	Adequate personal response to the learning experience	Substantial personal response to the learning experience

[This is an abbreviated version of the descriptions used in the mark scheme]

Method

A random sample of 22 of the 165 first year, marked reflective assignments, were thematically examined to determine how the student demonstrates reflective learning and development. This number was selected to provide a range of different scripts to be evaluated and exceeds the usual number extracted for moderation from a sample of coursework assignments.

The evaluation also considered whether the format of the reflective assignment supports the student in an understanding of the relevance and purpose of reflective practice as part of future professional development. The text produced by each student was checked to determine emerging themes. This process involved studying each assignment in detail and highlighting common phrases or themes. The themes were derived by using a repetitive process, examining the assignment text several times to determine the most common themes as listed in Table II.

The themes were considered in conjunction with the evaluation comments written by academic members of staff on the assignment. The final stage in the process was an informal meeting with staff involved in the marking process to gain the academic perspective on the written assignment, the assessment criteria and the marking process. The academic staff perspective was captured as written summary notes following the meeting.

Evaluation

The major themes to emerge from the student text are highlighted in Table II.

Table II: Themes from an examination of student reflective written accounts

Theme	Example text
A mainly descriptive account of what happened at the event	<i>"In our group we were given the task of constructing a tower...we each had to suggest some ideas."</i>
Willingness to acknowledge personal emotions	<i>"I am naturally shy..." "I felt anxious..."</i>
Clarity about the specific learning outcomes for the reflective process	<i>"The IPE event enabled me to increase my knowledge about other healthcare professionals." [statement lacking in specificity about what has been achieved]</i>
An attempt to write the 'right' answer that would be acceptable to the academic	<i>"A good leader needs excellent communication skills which is what I will focus on in the future."</i>
A lack of application of specific learning from the event to a generalisation about future personal development	<i>"I will analyse the problems I faced in a team setting and my learning experiences from them."</i>

It was evident that many students saw the purpose of the reflective exercise to simply describe what had happened at the IPE events (*i.e.* the teamwork activity), rather than spending time evaluating the team working element and how they could link this to their personal professional development. This suggested a lack of clarity surrounding the learning outcomes being assessed and the purpose of reflection itself. Clear assessment criteria as outlined by Brockbank and McGill (1998) is vital for this type of assessment but present specific challenges due to the nature of what is being assessed. If the specific purpose of the reflective report is to give credit for achieving an end goal (for example, actions towards personal development), there is a need for evidence of both the learning journey and also that personal development has taken place.

Students overall were competent at analysing the situation itself, but then struggled to move reflection on from the event itself to themselves, making generalisations about the experience rather than personalising it. Many students were willing to acknowledge their own personal emotions or personality traits with comments such as “*I felt anxious*” but it was uncommon to see this observation taken to the next level of evaluation. This work confirms that first year students remain unclear about what the real purpose of reflection is in the transformative sense that Biggs and Tang (2011) discuss. The student sees the point of reflection (what they see) as the end point of the process, whereas through true transformative reflection they would see the start of ‘what we might be’ and part of a multi-stage process of reflect-plan-apply and evaluate.

The main academic perspectives involved detailed discussion around differing views of what constituted a ‘Pass’ or ‘Fail’. Academics, especially those of a scientific background, may be unfamiliar with the use of personal voice in academic writing. There was some concern expressed about the lack of prescriptive rules as reflective writing is personal to the individual. Hargreaves (2004) notes that despite there being much educational writing to support the use of reflective practice in teaching, there is a dearth of literature to support it as a tool for assessment. One reason for this is the difficulty in linking personal reflection to the achievement of specific learning outcomes. Boud *et al.* (1995) maintain that it is essential for clear learning outcomes to be present if reflection is to be summative. In this assessment, it could be argued that there was insufficient translation of the assessment criteria into clear, personal, explanatory learning outcomes.

The assignment used a marking grid to indicate the level achieved for each of the seven outcomes. The study suggests that the marking grid itself could have been a hindrance to the reflective process. The grid format whilst useful for the academic when marking, potentially makes it more difficult for students to apply a fluid reflective model, such as Kolb’s Cycle (1984) to their writing. Students tended to follow the format rigidly which essentially encouraged them to compartmentalise the events, rather than linking the activities together in a reflective cycle.

Future work

The decision to use reflective writing as a tool for summative assessment is open for a wider discussion, especially due to the personal nature of this learning activity. The main focus for the future development of reflective assignment work will focus on the following three areas. Firstly, future assignments will have more specific learning outcomes with examples for students of how these outcomes may be translated into personal reflective learning. Secondly the evaluation has highlighted the need for increased awareness of how reflection can be assessed and an acknowledgement of the characteristics of this type of writing compared to traditional academic writing. This will involve continued engagement with the literature on reflective writing and ongoing analysis of student written work to further develop this assignment and associated assessment. In addition this work identified the need for continuing dialogue amongst academic staff of different disciplines about the nature of reflective writing. Finally this evaluation has underlined the need for a more fluid approach to the reflective assignment such as the six stage cyclical approach proposed by Gibbs (1988) rather than a grid-based criterion referenced format that was used in this study. As a result of this initial work an innovative assignment marking scheme is currently being piloted that uses a continuing professional development cycle format. Part of the action plan for this ongoing evaluation is to examine student work and staff feedback on the new assessment process for this reflective assignment.

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