Reflective Writing for Assignments

This workshop will:

- Familiarise you with the process of producing a piece of reflective writing for assessment
- Help you to understand the difference between theory and evidence
- Provide tips on how to integrate theory when writing reflective assignments

Teaching points:

1. The composition of reflective writing
2. Explaining theory and evidence
3. The process of producing reflective academic work
1. The composition of reflective writing

There are many forms of reflective writing, from basic log books with key phrases to prompt memory to the academic reflective assignment. Each of these is expressed using different language and has different content and structure requirements. The reflective written assignment’s is in many ways no different to any other:

- it most have the appropriate academic tone and language
- it must answer the set question or task

However, there are significant differences from other academic work:

- you must ensure any individuals discussed remain anonymous
- honesty about the experience and your emotions is imperative
- you may be able to write in the first person (check with your tutor)

Your content will depend on the question/task’s criteria; are you being asked to learn from a difficult situation or recognise strengths or another element of your placement experience? However, the following gives you a basis to work from and is also a suggested structure of a reflective assignment:

A. A description of your experience with any thoughts or emotions you had at the time: DESCRIBE
B. A ‘distancing’ of yourself from that experience and becoming objective, as if you were considering someone else’s experience. This will help you think about what went well and what didn’t: EVALUATE
C. Now you process the whole experience and try to understand what happened. This involves any relevant previous experience and theories or evidence (you may have to do some reading if you haven’t already): ANALYSE
D. Finally, you pull everything together; you discuss what you have learnt and explain how it may affect your response to other experiences: SYNTHESISE

or

DESCRIBE ➔ EVALUATE ➔ ANALYSE ➔ SYNTHESISE

Many students find the middle two terms confusing as they appear to be the opposite way round to what would be expected in other academic written assessments. This is because they mean different things. In reflective writing, evaluate refers to your emotions and the reflecting back on how you felt at the time of an event or series of events, whereas in academic work it follows analysis and would entail a judgement being made concerning the thing being analysed when compared or contrasted to something else. Analysis in reflective writing involves you thinking about what else has happened in the past that might have a bearing on this event and considering any relevant theories or evidence.
Let's look at the two lists below and identify which statement matches which aspect of reflective writing.

Fairburn et al. (2011) found that some people suffer from mood swings and short-temperedness when they feel no therapeutic progress is being made. I remember a colleague mentioning a similar situation occurring in a different clinic.

If a client gets angry easily, it may be an early sign that treatment is not proceeding effectively and I need to be mindful of this. I should also review client notes before starting an interview.

I was scared and confused which led to not handling the situation well. After the client had left, I noticed they had several unresolved MHIs in his/her records.

During an interview, a client became very angry and stormed out.

**Activity 1: Your turn**

Now you reflect on a situation or experience or make one up, and apply the four stages and steps of reflective writing. You can work in pairs or small groups if you wish.

**Description**

**Evaluation**

**Analysis**

**Synthesis**
2. Explaining theory and evidence

To explain the difference between theory and evidence, we can show how they are different but connected through the example of the placebo effect.

The original theory was placebos do not work as they have no contents having a health benefit to people. HOWEVER, we all know that the evidence is to the contrary – placebos do work, consequently the theory had to change. Therefore, evidence can be used to develop and drive theories which is very much part of the research element to dissertations and major projects. So as you can see, whilst theory and evidence can be viewed as being two different and separate elements, they are linked.

“Make sure to take it every day, otherwise the effect wears off.”

The purpose of your academic assignments is not simply to show your tutor that you have done the required reading by dropping in references here and there. The purpose is to show that you can see the link between theories, evidence, ideas and approaches you read about, and their relevance to your personal experience. To do this you need first to understand the content, and then to reflect on the implications for you and your practice.

How you organise you writing can help you do this. After you have been immersed in reading, try making the conscious effort to reflect on the link between your experience and the theory, evidence, policies or studies you are reading.

You can then use these topic areas that link theory/evidence/practice as a basis for the paragraphs and sections in your writing such as learning journals, logs and summaries.

Being able to apply new ideas or information from your courses or reading is what learning is about. You become someone who can use – or reject or refute – ideas or approaches you have read about. This is why the ability to apply ideas is towards the top of the critical ‘staircase’, and why it is so often explicitly required for the higher grades.

To make this happen, you need to reflect on the points of connection. Your reading explains, interprets, provides evidence for, and makes you rethink or resolve issues. You can draw on it or apply it to your experience and with it your beliefs, knowledge, values and opinions.

Whichever comes first for you...
reading

or experience

...the point is that you show that you have reflected on how the two connect. In your writing you can then discuss the implications of what you have read for what you do and how you think.

Below is a sample from a Bradford University student’s assignment reflecting on their volunteering for a youth offending team (please note, your tutors may not wish you to use the first person ‘I’ in your work):

At the beginning I had anxieties. I felt it would be difficult creating a working alliance, because it was not voluntary for (the young people). To engage well with the young person, it is important to understand their body language as well as my own (Koprowska, 2009). If the young person showed no interest, I would use my skills to get the young person to engage with me, try and find out what they was interested in and what they wanted to discuss. Communication is crucial to social work practice: being able to understand what people are trying to communicate and to be able to interpret your own thoughts and feelings is an effective skill to have (Trevithick, 2000).

*N.B. The layout above is for emphasis only and NOT the format to be used in your written assignments.

Here the student interweaves their reading, Kaprowska and Trivithick, which supports their practice, into their assignment. It is possible the student did their reading first to develop their communication skills, or afterwards to explain and describe why they acted as they did and possibly to improve.
Let’s look at another extract together and discuss what the student has done with his/her reading concerning improvement in their confidence.

Being the youngest of three sisters, I was a very quiet and reserved person who shadowed and mirrored my older sisters to fit in: “childhood is a time of meeting one’s own and others’ expectations” (Cooper and Straw, 1998: 42). I felt I had no personality of my own. This topic is in the headlines frequently with one example being that anorexia has increased by 25% within a year in eight year old girls due to them wanting to be super-skinny like many female celebrities (Wilson, 2009).

When we are young, we just want to be like the people around us whether they are like us or not. Going into high school, making friends and learning to accept me as others saw me increased my self-confidence. In year 10, I joined the debating team and then participated in debating competitions speaking on controversial topics such as 'The English judiciary system needs to be changed', 'Parents have the right to choose the genetics of their babies' and 'Everyone has a right to work'. I saw a rise in my self-confidence again as I became more comfortable speaking to a wide range of audiences. Arguing points increased my belief in myself and who I was. I then began to accept that I was different but perfect in my own way: “confidence is invariably a constructive and stimulative force” (Yoder, 1996: 95). From this new found confidence, I now enjoy giving presentations, meeting new people and thrive on the adrenaline rush of performing in front of a large crowd.

Activity 1: Assessing an extract from a student’s reflective written assignment

Read the excerpt below and, in pairs, consider how the reading was used, and whether it is appropriate or not. Look for any gaps in referencing or in further reading.

As Parker illustrates, supervision sessions are valuable in checking and maintaining progress within an agency, and I was able to discuss any difficulties and issues with a key worker at the end of each panel. Writing a reflective journal after each panel helped me improve my practice. I could write down my thoughts and feelings, and reflect how I could make changes to improve my practice. One example was that when I started volunteering, I made judgements about a person based on their initial review. By reflecting on this, I realised that making quick judgements was a mistake. Reflective practice is central to social work and it is considered to be a key way to improve and develop your learning needs.
3. The process of producing reflective academic work

There is a lot of pre-writing work required before a reflective assignment can be submitted.

Let’s complete the 9 stage process for creating a written reflective assignment together. The first and last boxes have been completed to get us started.

As you can see from the process, you can introduce your theory and evidence research at a number of different points depending on whether your reflection or reading comes first. Work to what feels the most comfortable for you.

References


Graphics – Smart Art


**Answers**

Matching exercise

Fairburn et al. (2011) found that some people suffer from mood swings and short-temperedness when they feel no therapeutic progress is being made. I remember a colleague mentioning a similar situation occurring in a different clinic.

If a client gets angry easily, it may be an early sign that treatment is not proceeding effectively and I need to be mindful of this. I should also review client notes before starting an interview.

I was scared and confused which led to not handling the situation well. After the client had left, I noticed they had several unresolved MHIs in his/her records.

During an interview, a client became very angry and stormed out.

Growth in confidence

Here the student has used quotations so the reading is shown in a slightly different way than the previous excerpt with the quotations being discrete from the rest of the text. The
quotations are appropriate as they relate directly to the student’s reflections on their feelings and experiences. However, the student mentions “anorexia has increased by 25% within a year in eight year old girls”: we do not know where this information came from so a marker should question its credibility.

**Activity 1: Assessing an extract from a student’s reflective written assignment**

There is no publication date for Parker, but paraphrase is relevant to the point the student is making. How does this student know that “reflective practice is central to social work, etc.”? This sounds like a comment found in a source but there is no citation. A marker will identify this too and it could lead to a question of plagiarism.

---

**9 stage writing process**

1. Analyse the question, brief or problem
2. Re-read lecture notes, handouts, etc.
3. Find central experience/s in research journal
4. Organise final notes
5. Research and choose theories/evidence
6. Consider previous experiences/knowledge
7. Map or plan
8. First draft
9. Revise & edit (redraft)
10. Proof & submit