Theory, Sources and Evidence in
Reflective Writing for Assignments

This workshop will:

− Describe what theory and evidence from sources are
− Help you to understand how they can be used in reflective writing
− Offer an approach to writing to help you achieve the integration of theory and evidence

Teaching points:

1. Defining theory and evidence
2. The importance of using theory and evidence-based practice in reflective written work
3. The process of producing reflective academic work
1. Defining theory and evidence

Let’s start with what dictionaries tell us these terms mean:

**Theory:** a proposition, or set of propositions, set forth as an explanation for the occurrence of some specified group of phenomena either to guide investigation (an educated guess) or accepted as highly probable in the light of established facts.

**Evidence:** is data on which to base proof or to establish truth or falsehood.

So, theory and evidence are two different concepts BUT can come together within various processes, including reflection.

An example of the difference between the two but how they intertwine is 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 links.
In science this interaction is part of the process **scientists** use when they **re-evaluate** a theory based upon new evidence: **reflection and revision** of theories starts when something new is discovered (evidence) or when it becomes possible to measure something new (evidence). This, in turn, may provide **new evidence** which then doesn't match the theory.

With **social and health** disciplines, theories require reflection more regularly as they are often based on **generalities** and **individuals** may provide **exceptions** to those theories. The reflective process supplies information as to whether the theory is helpful or not when applied to a given situation in the future (evidence is generated) or if the theory does not tally with a further experience (evidence).

### 2. The importance of using theory and evidence-based practice in reflective written work

In high-level professions there is usually an expectation that subject knowledge and understanding is highly contextualised, i.e. relevant to a particular environment and/or time. To create this link with the ‘real world’ of the qualified practitioner, it’s important not to rely on this happening ‘organically’ or just as it happens.

Instead, reflection is seen as the method by which a professional can frame the subject matter in light of their practical experience. Additionally, it is also the method by which a professional grows, changes and adapts – by constantly thinking about the impact of their expertise, its strengths and the areas that can be developed further given what they know about theory, method and practice in their field.

Academic writing funnels...

- the self-questioning or analytic aspect of reflection: taught in education, carried out individually and shared in a group or one-to-one situation

and

- your relevant professional experience: undertaken during your placement or in employment

with

- theory and evidence: accessing different relevant sources and including appropriate evidence or support into written work

which is envisioned in the following graphic:
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...

Discussion of the theory  Bring in the reflective point  Add evidence as appropriate
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 if 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.

*Identify and explore the reflective point*  
*Introduce the theory to support*  
*Add evidence as appropriate*
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


www.brad.ac.uk/academic-skills


**Answers**

**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 experiences in research journal/remember experiences
4. Map or plan
5. Organise final notes
6. Research & critical analysis
7. First draft
8. Revise & edit (redraft)
9. Proof & submit