

## Chapter 15

# Exploring and Developing Reflective Writing Rubrics in Higher Education

**Martin Sands**

*King's College London, UK*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter highlights key academic contentions around assessing reflection in higher education. Through assimilating experiential, conceptual, and empirical evidence, key terms are defined: 'reflection' as a conceptual and neuroscientific phenomenon within higher education; 'reflective practices' as activities, models, and frameworks that facilitate it; and 'reflective assessments' as content or process driven products of those practices. A literature review elucidates three voices that speak to reflection in higher education.*

### **INTRODUCTION: CHARACTERISING REFLECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Before designing learning activities and assessments that seek to assess reflection, it is important to contextualise its existence and facets that are the potential focus of assessment. Reflection is a phenomenon in higher education conceptualized upon theories of adult education, yet its component parts, function and constructs are varied and abstract. In his concept analysis for higher education Rogers (2001) deconstructs the phenomenon of reflection through synthesizing some fifteen different and heterogenous theories. Of note, Rogers (2001) describes the process, which encapsulates the steps involved in the reflective thought or reflective practice. This includes: 1.) identifying a problem or event that needs addressing; 2.) collecting further information and an awareness of different perspectives, questions and assumptions; 3.) deciding to act including reframing, meaning making and transforming previous understandings; 4.) taking action related to the previous steps. Rogers (2001) also describes the outcomes which includes the learning from the reflective practice, which are demonstrated through different assessment modes (including written and oral means). Reflective assessments, therefore, involve several factors for consideration, including whether the assessment is content driven (focused on outputs and

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learning), or process driven (focused on how an individual got to their new learning), or both. Despite commonalities identified in the various concepts of reflection (Rogers, 2001), numerous authors have debated the heterogeneity of its inputs and outputs and how these interact with educational activities and assessment. It follows then, that when designing learning reflective assessments and activities, it is important to understand the key voices, contentions and conventions related to reflection. It is also important to consider how each impact on meeting learning outcomes, inclusive learning, and assessment fairness. A systematic approach towards searching the literature has identified opposing opinions about reflection, reflective assessments and reflective practices culminating in three different philosophical viewpoints or *voices* that speak to reflection: the *reductionist*, *pluralist* and *pragmatic*. Ng et al. (2015) introduced the concepts of reductionist and pluralist elements of reflection, whereas the third voice, the pragmatic, is introduced here as it emerges from the literature through tensions between the other two.

While a systematic approach to the literature has cast a wide net, much of what emerged was found in medical and healthcare related subjects including medicine, physiotherapy, nursing, and pharmacy, with a smaller proportion in social sciences and teaching. Given the common educational theories, it is hoped that the literature in this chapter provides a relevant or parallel context for other professions too.

## **Reflection: Reductionist Entity or Pluralist Phenomenon**

In designing criteria and descriptors for different modes of assessment, it is important to understand what the assessment mode looks like. For example, practical exams, laboratory reports, presentations and exams usually have some defining structure by which a learner and assessor can mutually agree a scaffold that allows a learner to demonstrate outcomes of learning. However, despite the integration of reflection in higher education, its definition and defining characteristics remain somewhat an enigma, with more work needed to provide an agreement on its definition and processes by students and educators alike (Rogers, 2001; Uygur et al., 2019). Historically, numerous seminal authors have defined reflection theoretically or conceptually (Dewey, 2006; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983), and a review of past and contemporary literature has found two strongly opposing voices within the reflective debate: the *reductionist* and *pluralist*.

The *reductionist* voice speaks of seeking a definition of reflection, and a way to prove its existence as an independent entity, presumably to help ring-fence the teaching of reflection and its process to developing professionals. In the 1990's, concurrent to the rapid inclusion of reflective assessments in professional programmes, (Johns & Freshwater, 1998, p. 2) remarked, 'It seems an academic pastime to define exactly what it [*reflection*] is.' Since then, integration of reflection and reflective assessments in curricula has grown across a broad spectrum of higher education programmes. Reflective frameworks and models are regularly cited as nurturing personal attributes such as empathy, emotional intelligence, self-awareness and resilience, and are included in guidance documents for the completion of reflective essays and professional portfolios. Written reflective statements are used to support the validation and revalidation of licenses for practice professionals, and the skill of reflection is regularly highlighted as contingent to the effective practitioner. Over time, reflection and reflective practices have adopted increasingly higher stakes functions in professional education. Literature since John's and Freshwaters' observations has demonstrated ongoing attempts to legitimise the role of reflection in professional and academic practice. Perhaps reducing reflection to its constituent parts has become less of a 'pastime', and more of an essential preoccupation to align its educational purposes to its intended outcomes.

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