



Reflective writing as summative assessment in higher education: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Reflective writing as summative assessment has gained popularity across a wide range of subjects in higher education. This systematic review searched three cross-disciplinary databases and analysed twenty-two primary research papers published between 2007 and 2022 to investigate (1) the reasons for setting reflective writing as summative assessment, (2) support offered to students engaging in this kind of assessment, (3) student and (4) staff experiences of reflective writing as summative assessment. Using descriptive coding methodology, the review found reflective writing to be used mainly as part of larger assessment tools in professional degree programmes to foster employability and encourage students to reflect on professional practice. Support was provided through specific frameworks, exemplars, feedback and workshops, and when used to foster the incremental development of reflective writing skills in students led to positive experiences. However, the review also highlights a number of issues relating to lacking assessment literacy among students and staff. Moreover, the personal nature of reflection and power dynamics between students and markers can lead to performative instead of genuine reflection and can call into question the validity of reflective writing as summative assessment.

Keywords: reflective writing, summative assessment, assessment literacy

Introduction

This systematic literature review aims to cast light on research that has been published on reflective writing as summative assessment in higher education. Reflection as a means to learn and develop has its origin in the work of Dewey (1904), who saw reflection as an important part of personal development and growth in situations of experiential learning and where there is interaction with others (Rodgers, 2002). Building on Dewey's insights, the seminal work of Schön (1983) discussed reflection-in-action and professional ways of knowing. Another well-known work is by Kolb (1984), who designed a four-stage experiential learning cycle.

As higher education massified and globalised, it also transformed into a conduit for the jobs market (Altbach, 2004). This led to the design of professional degree programmes in which reflection was deemed to be necessary. In consequence, reflection can commonly be found in disciplines where practical placements are beneficial to develop learning, for example, health sciences such as nursing (Kinsella, 2010), medicine (Wald & Reis, 2010), education (Brookfield, 2017), psychology (Ferreira et al., 2017), and social work (Cunningham & Moore, 2014). Reflection has also emerged in other fields such as engineering (Feest & Iwugo, 2006) and management (Carson & Fisher, 2006) where considering one's own assumptions "can develop more collaborative, responsive, and ethical ways of managing organizations" (Cunliffe 2016, p. 748).

Reflective writing as summative assessment in higher education: A systematic review

Reflection in contemporary higher education is often part of summative written assessment. Writing often plays a key role in assessment (Bolton, 2018; Moon, 2004) because it is seen to provide learners with a space to analyse their experiences, to help them to understand their own learning (Boud, 2001) and, it is the most common mode of assessment in higher education. The importance and prominence of reflective writing in many degree programmes means that there is a need for the development of relevant assessment literacies for students.

This literature review, then, aims to uncover what is known about these issues and is guided by the following questions.

1. What are the reasons for introducing reflective writing for summative assessment?
2. What support is provided for students who undertake reflective writing for summative assessment?
3. What is the student experience of reflective writing for summative assessment?
4. What is the staff experience of reflective writing for summative assessment?

By uncovering and drawing together answers to these questions, it is hoped that we can better understand the extent to which these questions have been answered in the literature and provide a platform for practitioners to better develop assessment literacies for their students.

Methodology

To carry out this systematic review, we worked in a team, as is suggested by Macaro (2020) to reduce individual bias by following a scientific method. Two authors were lecturers in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and one was a lecturer in Academic Development. This allowed us to bring different perspectives to the review process. Our reasons for reviewing the literature were pragmatic: we wanted to know more about current reflective writing assessment practices in order to build a student resource for a particular institution. The aim of this resource was to support students in developing their reflective writing skills and improve assessment literacies.

We initially developed review questions 1, 2 and 3, which focused on the student experience. However, as the investigation progressed, we decided to add question 4. This was when we realised that there was a significant amount of data specifically about the teacher experience, which could also help us better understand assessment practices for students.

Sample

Our sample included research and scholarship studies where reflective writing had been part of summative assessment in a higher education context. We used the following inclusion criteria:

1. Must be written reflection in an academic context;
2. Must be written reflection for assessment of a summative nature;
3. Must have been published between 2007 and 2022;
4. Must have been published in English;
5. Must have been peer reviewed.

When deciding what publication date range would be appropriate, we found that 2007 was a significant year to start with because research on reflective writing appears to have become more prominent in the literature then.

We also used exclusion criteria. Studies were excluded if they were:

1. Reporting only on formative assessment of written academic work;
2. Not peer reviewed;
3. Not written in English.

The following key search terms were used:

- Reflective writing
- Assessment
- Higher Education

We initially used the terms 'summative' and 'university' in our search because these were key terms for our investigation. However, both terms were problematic in different ways. The use of the term 'summative' returned very few studies. Conversely, the use of the term 'university' returned multiple results, many of which were not relevant to our study. Both were thus excluded as search terms, and we chose to replace 'university' with 'higher education'.

Procedure

Initial Review

As reflective writing practices for summative assessment take place across a wide range of disciplines, we decided to use the database Web of Science to capture a broad range of studies from across disciplines, and then the British Education Index and ERIC to specifically identify studies in assessment that may have been published in the education context. Google Scholar was initially included in the databases; however, its inclusion would have required a significant time investment on our part to learn how to use it. As working practitioners, we did not have the available time to do this.

Therefore, the following databases were searched:

- Web of Science (17 sources found)
- British Education Index (5 sources found)
- ERIC (11 sources found)

In each of these databases, the following search was undertaken: Searching for title 'reflective writing' was entered AND, searching for topic, 'assessment' was entered, AND searching for topic, 'Higher Education' was entered. Several dry runs were undertaken to test the search terms and comparisons of results were made between researchers.

Articles were then exported as an .ris file to Zotero for short listing with the use of a shared library between researchers. Using the functionality of the Zotero software, duplicates were identified and removed. The library of articles was then re-checked manually for duplicates. The comments function in the shared library was then used by the researchers to state a decision whether an article was relevant, partly relevant, or irrelevant. Each decision was supported with a brief reason. All decisions were discussed in person with all three researchers present with a particular focus on any areas of disagreement. After discussion, all articles deemed relevant and accessible were included in the review and those deemed irrelevant were excluded. The included articles are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Studies included in literature review analysis.

Study	Year	Country	Discipline
Barton & Ryan	2014	Australia	Creative Industries
Burnett et al.	2008	UK	Medicine
Carter et al.	2017	Australia	Nursing and Midwifery
Chan & Luo	2020	Hong Kong	Not specified
Dahlback et al.	2020	Norway	Vocational educational training
Dunne	2017	Republic of Ireland	Pharmacy
Dunne	2019	Republic of Ireland	Pharmacy
Gadbury-Amyot & Overman	2018	USA	Dental education
Gleaves et al.	2008	UK	Higher education
Grant et al.	2007	UK	Medical education
Howells et al.	2016	Australia	Teacher education
Kim	2013	Australia	Management
Liang et al.	2016	Taiwan	Data processing
Marsh	2014	UK	Forensic psychology
Mattheos et al.	2009	Australia	Dentistry
Moniz et al.	2015	Canada	Medicine
Murphy & Laxton	2014	UK	Social work
Ono & Ichii	2019	Australia	Business
Southcott & Crawford	2018	Australia	Education
Stupans et al.	2013	Australia	Pharmacy
Troyan & Kaplan	2015	USA	Education
Tummons	2011	UK	Higher education

Data Analysis

After the initial review, 33 studies were selected from which 22 appeared relevant as they addressed, in some part, the research questions. All studies were then added to a previously designed matrix which allowed us to systematically organise notes into categories relevant to the research questions. These included detailing the discipline in which the study took place (e.g. dentistry, psychology), the details of the study (e.g. sample size, analytical approach), and the research question(s) addressed by the findings.

Papers were distributed between the three authors. Each paper was summarised. Summaries were then coded. The coding system used a descriptive coding approach, where codes were given to describe a section of text. Codes were then brought together to describe what appeared to be a wider theme that was emerging from the analysis.

Limitations

We recognise that our review has a number of limitations. All three authors work in fields that centre on pedagogy in higher education. The number of articles reviewed here is relatively small and most papers stem from professional degree programmes such as medicine and education. Only a few focus on reflective writing in other fields although we are aware from the context of our own institution that it is adopted across a much wider range of courses and fields.

What are the reasons for introducing reflective writing for summative assessment?

We have identified three main reasons to set reflective writing assessment tasks: (1) to foster employability and enable reflection on professional practice; (2) to facilitate self-assessment and self-directed learning; and (3) to allow integration of academic theories into the analysis of personal experience. In the following, we will focus on the first two as these have been cited in most of the studies we reviewed.

Fostering employability and enabling reflection on professional practice

Fostering employability

We observed that reflective writing assessments appear to be set predominantly to foster students' employability for a range of workplaces. For instance, Barton and Ryan (2014), report on a study that includes arts subjects such as Fashion, Music and Dance, where reflective writing might be used to deepen subject knowledge and link it to working in the creative industries. There are other studies which similarly connect reflection to the development of employability, often with a focus on graduate attributes. Dunne (2017) writes about a reflective writing assignment that asks students to reflect on their work placements as pharmacy technicians in order to develop their awareness of graduate attributes and enhance employability. A similar push was found in other subject areas, for example, in a study by Howells et al. (2016), which reports on pre-service teachers reflecting on their graduate attributes in relation to school placements. Reflective writing assignments in the above studies are integrated into the curriculum while other studies (Marsh, 2014) report on reflection as part of a particular professional skills development module.

Reflecting on Professional Practice

Regardless of the wider appeal of reflection in assignments, as summative assessment, it appears to be particularly popular in subject areas that lead to professional careers in educational, clinical and care settings. Subjects offering teacher training (Tummons, 2011) and those preparing students for social work (Murphy & Laxton, 2014) value reflection as a tool to gather evidence of learning and professional development. In fact, reflective writing is a staple assessment in educational studies where it is typically deployed to allow students to reflect on the planning and delivery of lessons, teaching observations and development of assessment methods (Trojan & Kaplan, 2015). However, it is also used to encourage emerging and developing teachers to see themselves as change agents with social responsibility and to engage in life-long learning (Howells et al., 2016).

The literature we reviewed indicates that reflections also play a key role in clinical subjects where professional competence, integrity and accountability have potentially life-changing impacts. For instance, Mattheos et al. (2009) cite that they introduced reflection as an assessment strategy to enable dental students to self-assess and demonstrate their competence when making clinical choices in real patient encounters. Fostering self-assessment in this way was meant to prevent an overestimation of one's performance, which the authors identified as a problem especially among novice surgeons. Similarly, Marsh (2014) cited the enhancement of competence and integrity in forensic settings as one of the main goals of the reflections. The overall aim therefore, when setting reflective writing assignments in clinical or related subjects, is to create reflective practitioners who possess appropriate self-awareness of their own capabilities and associated responsibilities of working in the medical sector. This appears to be important for students' identity formation as professionals but also for the development of empathy as part of medical care. For example, Moniz et al. (2015) write that reflection has become the primary assessment tool in an undergraduate medical degree in Canada to discuss issues related to patient experiences of an illness and increase students' understanding of the importance of person-centred care. In this case, reflection thus enables emerging practitioners to synthesise theoretical knowledge, clinical skills and patient care.

Considering the evident importance of reflective writing in (self-) assessing professional skills, it is not surprising that it is often part of larger assessment tools which are designed to create a global overview of students' learning and development. In Mattheos et al. (2009, p. 61), "student reflective statements" are just one of six parts of a wider performance assessment tool. Likewise, Gadbury-Amyot and Overman (2018) write about reflective writing as part of a programmatic portfolio which is developed over a five-year period while Grant et al. (2007) discuss a portfolio medical students produced during a 3-week GP attachment, which required them to reflect on two Significant Incident Analyses alongside other tasks such as agenda setting and health needs analyses. Reflecting on (professional) action appears to be the overriding approach when part of a larger assessment tool. Stupans et al. state this explicitly when they report on a study about Pharmacy students reflecting "in action, on action, and for action" (2013, p. 507). Similarly, Burnett et al. (2008) write about a Cleanliness programme, where medical students reflected on past and present actions in order to enhance their practice. Clinical professionals work in high stakes environments and the ability to (self-) monitor accuracy, competence and a life-long commitment to improving standards seems crucial.

Facilitating self-assessment and self-directed learning

Many of the same studies also emphasised the importance of reflection for self-assessment and self-directed learning. For example, the personal development plan described by Mattheos et al. (2009, p. 60) aimed to foster self-assessment in order to create "reflective-competent" practitioners in dental healthcare and Gadbury-Amyot and Overman (2018) emphasised to students the importance of being able to convey what they have learned. Likewise, in Stupans et al. (2013) and Burnett et al. (2008), reflections are meant to enable students to describe their learning journey and enhance the ability to self-assess their clinical practice. Outside of the clinical setting, the focus on the learner's self-assessment is equally relevant. Lian et al. (2016) for instance asked whether paper or web-based reflections are better for facilitating self-regulated learning in a website design course. In Howells et al. (2016), students reflect on the development of a graduate attribute and their own evolving teacher philosophy. It seems that reflective writing is essential in encouraging and enabling students to give meaning to their learning journey and support them to become reflective and competent practitioners who can engage with their own experiences in a constructive way.

In sum, in the studies we analysed, reasons for setting reflective writing tasks for summative assessments appear to spring mainly from the demands of professional practice, especially clinical and educational workplaces, where the presence of self-directed, competent and reflective practitioners is of uttermost importance to the delivery of adequate and empathic care. However, its popularity has spread to other subject areas, such as website design, where reflective writing is deployed to facilitate self-directed learning.

What support is provided for students who undertake reflective writing for summative assessment?

In the studies reviewed, we found different forms of support provided to aid the development of students' reflective writing. The types of support given varied and included implementing a clear reflective writing framework, the sharing of assessment criteria, and comprehensive and embedded support systems throughout the duration of a course. While the forms and amount of support differed, there appeared to be a positive correlation between the support given and the quality of reflective writing produced by the students.

Reflective Writing Frameworks

The importance of providing a clear framework was highlighted in a number of studies. For example, Dunne's (2017; 2019) research on pharmacy students discusses the use of graduate attributes to help students reflect on their work-related placement. In her studies, a more explicit inclusion of graduate attributes in the curriculum appeared to raise the quality of reflective writing in the control group. This improvement in the quality of writing was also noticed by Stupans et al. (2013) who observed in their study that students tended to produce higher quality responses to an assessment task if they were provided with clear and explicit instructions, assessment criteria, and relevant support material. In Ono and Ichii's (2019) context, students were supported with an assignment support pack. This was a comprehensive resource which included guidelines and marking criteria. It also contained a clear framework for reflective writing: the Description, Interpretation, Evaluation and Plan (DIEP) which was supported through workshops with learning advisors. Specific sections of the DIEP included prompts to help students better understand the requirements of the assessment task and guide them in the development of their reflective writing skills. Deconstructing the reflective writing framework in this case helped to provide manageable steps for students to follow and scaffolded the writing task. Similar forms of support were discussed in the study by Southcott and Crawford (2018) where the students were provided with a similar framework to help them focus their thinking and present their writing in a structured way. Furthermore, the study by Gadbury-Amyot and Overman (2018) also describes support to help students structuring a reflective portfolio.

Other Forms of Support

The literature review also revealed other forms of support. In the study by Murphy and Laxton (2014), where a new assessment tool was used, exemplars were created to enhance students' understanding of the process and promote dialogue when discussing student work with their supervisors. Another form of support was weekly workshops used by Troyan and Kaplan (2015) which focused on the development of students' reflective writing skills, the development of their professional/academic identity and provided opportunities for peer feedback. Murphy and Laxton (2014) refer to the use of exemplars to support both staff and student understanding of assessment criteria. Another example is the study by Marsh (2014), which discusses emotional support for psychology students working towards reflecting on their clinical experience. For example, the students were asked to focus on positive experiences of their clinical placement which could lead to improving their self-confidence.

The incremental process of developing students' reflective writing skills was discussed in a number of studies. For example, business students in Ono and Ichii's (2019) paper started the process of developing their reflective writing skills by producing shorter texts on which they received regular staff or peer feedback. The feedback was then applied when developing pieces of writing into a longer text. The importance of formative feedback was also discussed by Dahlback et al. (2020). In their study, the students were supported by being given formative feedback both in written and oral form. Providing formative feedback in different formats enabled dialogue between the students and tutors, supporting the development of students' reflective writing practices. Promoting a dialogue between students and staff was also a feature of support in Moniz's et al. (2015) paper in which students' responses to reflective writing prompts received individual feedback both online and in-person. This, the authors claim, was to help with the development of students' professional competencies.

The studies discussed in this section highlight the importance of making the reflective writing assessment process transparent and constructively aligned to ensure that the students clearly understand the task requirements and are able to develop the necessary skills to address the reflective task. Providing a clear framework for assessment allows

for an increase in the transparency of the assessment process, and incremental approaches support the development of reflective writing skills, especially when accompanied by formative feedback. While individual formative feedback might be the most desirable/effective form of support, we acknowledge this can be a practical challenge, in particular, when teaching large groups.

What is the student experience of reflective writing for summative assessment?

This review casts light on a number of different experiences that students in higher education have when undertaking reflective writing for summative assessment. These experiences are diverse. However, we have categorised them as positive experiences, problematic experiences, and ethical concerns.

Positive Experiences

The literature suggests that there have been many positive experiences of reflective writing for students. Positive experiences are particularly pertinent where support provision has scaffolded the reflective writing process to the extent that several studies relate them to positive outcomes. For example, Stupans et al. (2013) found that the provision of a clear step-by-step process for reflective writing that included a clear description of the task and fully explained examples had all played parts in positive student experiences. This may be particularly important for students who are unfamiliar with reflective writing as mentioned by Kim (2013), who stated that formative feedback helped students conceptualise the assignment task. Stupans et al. (2013) also claim that results from a case study they conducted indicate that carefully designed support to scaffold students improved student grades.

In their case study of a trainee teacher in language education, Troyan and Kaplan (2015) found that explicit instruction made aspects of reflection clearer. For them, explicit instruction had helped the participant to integrate theory into their reflective writing. Furthermore, they claim that the PPR (personal private reflection) approach helped their participant cope with feelings of anxiety and fear that were part of becoming an education professional. They also claimed that PPR was an important developmental stage toward deeper reflection with CAR (critical academic reflection). Indeed, the use of an explicit framework for reflective writing has been seen to scaffold the assessment process by helping students write with more systematicity, better interpret experiences, and process uncomfortable feelings that are part of transitioning from student life to professional practice (Murphy & Laxton, 2014; Ono & Ichii, 2019; Stupans et al., 2013).

Participants, who were trainee music teachers, in the Southcott and Crawford (2018) qualitative study indicated that reflective writing via autoethnography was helpful overall to the experience of reflective writing for assessment, especially with understanding past experiences in order to lay stronger foundations for the future. The literature also suggests that a positive experience for students has been the conceptualisation of their discipline and to develop deeper learning relevant to upcoming real-world professional practice (Ono & Ichii, 2019) which can improve student confidence going forward into the real world of employment.

Problematic Experiences

However, the literature also reports several accounts of where students have had problematic experiences. Some issues were pragmatic such as the time constraints found by Grant et al. (2007) in their study of medical students who struggled to complete a reflective portfolio which meant limited benefits and learning for some. However, many other reports in the literature suggest much more complex experiences by students, which may lead them to try to avoid or resist reflection.

A pertinent issue has emerged from studies that identify writing in the first person as difficult for some students. For example, Marsh (2014) points out that using the first person may evoke an emotional response during academic assessment which might be unfamiliar to students. They also highlight that reflective assessment may involve an amount of risk-taking. Similarly, Ono and Ichii (2019) point out that the personal nature of reflective writing might

Reflective writing as summative assessment in higher education: A systematic review

disclose vulnerabilities, which can be difficult to handle. This suggests that there are a number of variables present when assessing students which relate to past experiences, both personal and academic. For example, those disposed to discussing emotions openly, those with experience of reflection in past educational experience (Kim, 2013), and even those who are more open to risk-taking may be advantaged in the assessment process (Marsh, 2014).

Moreover, lack of familiarity and discomfort with the assessment may lead to performativity in student reflections. For instance, Chan and Luo (2020) discuss students writing to the assessment rubric instead of engaging in genuine deep reflection. Tummons (2011) proposes that this may be a way for students to protect themselves from challenges to their professional identity or from reliving troublesome experiences. It may be that students do not want to make themselves vulnerable in assessment. It may be that they do not want to unpick past experiences that were in some ways traumatic, leading to resistance to reflective assessment.

Ethical Concerns

A related aspect of reflective writing then is the matter of ethical considerations. This matter comes to light especially where the disclosure of personal experiences intersects with the power dynamic that exists between student and staff. This power dynamic is noted several times in the literature. For example, Murphy and Laxton's (2014) study of the experiences of undergraduate business students reports on a tension in reflective writing because of the power differential between student and teacher. Gleaves et al. (2008) report fears of students who were worried about being overly confessional in reflective writing and subsequently looking inadequate and lacking academic rigour in the eyes of the assessor.

In fact, the concern over ethics in reflective writing for assessment has existed in the literature for some time. This is clear from the literature trail from Chan and Lou's (2020) study. For example, in their own literature review they cite Cotton (2001) and English (2001), who over two decades ago questioned the ethics of reflective assessment in Nursing and Education respectively. There is clearly debate within the literature, however, with Cotton (2001) receiving a refutation shortly after publication (Markham, 2002). Nevertheless, the issues of ethics are clearly unresolved. Marsh (2014) particularly questions the coercing of personal, and perhaps even traumatic, experiences to assessors who have power in a dependent relationship.

What is the staff experience of reflective writing for summative assessment?

This section aims to address the fourth research question, a question that was added later to the review of literature and aimed to explore the experiences of staff. The literature review identified several studies in which staff innovated professional practices to facilitate reflective writing for summative assessment. However, it also reports on several concerns within practice, which include availability of time to support students and concerns about the validity and reliability of assessment practices, power differentials and ethical issues.

Facilitating the assessment of reflective writing

In terms of facilitating the assessment of reflective writing, four papers were identified as having innovated assessment practices. Firstly, Murphy and Laxton (2014) developed a table of elements that could help evidence reflective writing in the field of social work. Secondly, Liang et al. (2016) found that web-based written reflection better facilitated self-regulated learning by offering convenience to students and the opportunity for instant feedback. Thirdly, Grant et al. (2007) report using a three-point scale of "better than expected", "expected", "refer to grade portfolios" when grading reflective writing. Fourthly, Stupans et al. (2013) report that assessors cross-checked marking periodically to help assure constancy in their grades. In this case, assessors looked to identify connections between experiences, course materials, and reflections. Furthermore, assessors considered written communication skills and how assignment papers linked experiences to theories.

Staff concerns about assessing reflective writing

However, within the literature, there are clearly concerns about authenticity of reflection and marking to assessment standards, which has raised questions of reliability and validity from the perspective of teaching staff. An important aspect of this appears to be the issue of performativity, which has been raised above within the student experience (Murphy & Laxton 2014). From the student perspective, performativity in assessment may affect the depth of learning. However, from the staff perspective, if reflection is merely being performed then the validity of the assessment could come into question. This is indicated by Moniz et al. (2015), who discuss the use of a published reflective tool for assessing reflective writing that could strengthen the reliability of assessment practices. However, in doing so, they also question the extent to which the application of such an assessment tool may affect the validity of the written reflective work. For instance, authors question the extent to which applying summative assessment to reflective writing practices changes the nature of the product. In other words, genuine reflection may be sacrificed in order for the student to perform a version of reflection that they feel will help them attain the best grade. This concern is echoed by Troyan and Kaplan (2015) who question the extent to which compelling students to reflect with a framework may limit meaningful reflection. Finally, the extent to which reflective assessment can be made reliable is called into question by Tummons (2011), who describes the disparity in beliefs about what reflection is and how it should be demonstrated amongst staff and between tutor and student.

Ethical Concerns

This dynamic brings another salient concern to the fore: the power imbalance between student and assessor. This is raised by Murphy and Laxton (2014), who highlight that this concern has been ongoing for decades by citing much earlier sources that fall outwith the scope of this review. Collectively these authors call for anti-oppressive practices and the promotion of an honest discourse with a need to establish clear rules. This appears to echo concerns stated previously of the tension between performativity and genuine reflection. As pointed out by Gleaves et al. (2008) performativity may originate in the fear of looking incompetent in front of staff. Tummons (2011) suggests that knowing the student experience might help the assessor better understand the context from which the student text has been written; assessment practices need to reflect diversity and individual experience.

However, the extent to which ethical issues are seen or recognised by staff is widely unknown. A small window into this has been offered by Chan and Lou (2020), who report on an interview study of six novice teachers. From their six interviews, only two reported the ethics in assessment of reflective writing to be a concern. Further literature also highlights concerns regarding the time investment needed to properly support students through the reflective process. In one case, the time investment for student learning development was underestimated, potentially being the cause of several fails (Gadbury-Amyot & Overman, 2018). Furthermore, time constraints for staff was reported to possibly lead to, for example, difficulties facilitating student engagement with the genre (Grant et al., 2007), constructive alignment of assessment (Gleaves et al., 2008), and supporting international students effectively through an unfamiliar assessment process (Kim, 2013).

Conclusion

Summary

In this paper, we reviewed twenty-two studies researching reflective writing for summative assessment in higher education. Specifically, we explored the reasons for making reflective writing part of summative assessments and the ways in which students are prepared for and supported through these. Finally, we brought together some experiences of students and staff.

From the sample we analysed, the main reason for setting reflective writing as part of a summative assessment appears to be its usefulness for recording and self-assessing learning, especially in relation to professional practice.

Reflective writing as summative assessment in higher education: A systematic review

The literature discussed various ways in which students are supported through reflective writing tasks. For instance, this was with reflective writing, assessment criteria, exemplars, peer- and/or tutor feedback and reflective writing workshops.

The literature indicated a range of experiences students have when engaging in reflective writing. Positive experiences seem to correlate with effective support to incrementally develop reflective writing skills. Problems occurred when students felt under pressure due to time constraints and where the personal nature of reflective writing was too unfamiliar or created anxiety. Our review also shed light on ethical issues relating to the power dynamic between students reflecting and staff marking reflections. For staff, there were studies describing ways of making marking consistent amongst colleagues to increase reliability, others reported concerns regarding the validity of this form of assessment if students perform rather than offer genuine reflections.

Implications for academic practice

Based on this analysis, we suggest that this literature review has the following implications for academic practice.

Firstly, the process of reflective writing for summative assessment needs to be transparent for all involved. To allow students to engage with a reflective writing task in a meaningful way requires a clear definition of academic reflection together with a framework for the development of reflective writing. In the studies reviewed, more successful implementation of reflective writing was often linked to the incremental support embedded within the course structure and the provision of reflective writing frameworks. However, introducing an overly prescriptive model/framework of reflective writing can potentially increase task performativity rather than lead to genuine reflection. Instead of reflecting on their experiences, the students might provide a surface level reflection addressing the assessment rubric only.

Secondly, academic staff need to be supported in developing their academic literacies. Writing reflectively in an academic context somewhat differs from more traditional essay-style writing. The analysis of personal experiences viewed through the lens of relevant theory can add an additional dimension to the marking process which was addressed in some of the papers we reviewed. Ensuring parity of marking reflective writing might require creating a new assessment rubric or adapting such a rubric to the reflective writing genre. This, followed by a standardisation meeting during which sample assignments are analysed and graded, could provide an opportunity to clarify and discuss the application of any assessment rubric and, as a result, increase reliability and validity of marking reflective writing.

Overall, while reflective writing for summative assessment appears to be an extremely valuable tool in facilitating developing students' graduate attributes, encouraging self-directed learning and self-assessment, its implementation poses challenges. To ensure positive outcomes for students, transparency around assessment criteria and embedded support is crucial, together with the support for academic staff in developing their assessment literacies. Finally, considering ethical concerns among students and staff about the personal nature of reflection, more research and discussions are needed to investigate how these difficulties can be resolved in practice.

Biographies

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