# Exploring the Use of Structured Reflections in Assessment as Learning for Postgraduates

Azlina Murad Sani

Universiti Utara Malaysia

**Abstract**:  *This paper will share an assessment as learning strategy that was put into practice to support postgraduate students' active and critical engagement with course content.  Synergizing elements of reflective writing and assessment as learning, the strategy was based on two basic assumptions: firstly, that reflection would generate deeper thinking about the subject matter, and secondly, that an appropriate form of assessment would engage learners in the kind of learning that should be taking place.  At periodic intervals throughout a 14-week semester, a group of master's degree students wrote rubric-based in-class reflections on pre-selected topics as part of their regular coursework.  Analysis of student writing and instructor feedback showed a positive change in the nature of reflection, from descriptive to dialogic, over the task period.  This suggests a deeper engagement with course content.*

*Keywords:*  *learning-oriented assessment, reflective writing, postgraduates*

## 1.  Introduction

In addition to multiple work and family commitments, mature learners who advance to the postgraduate level face unique challenges that influence academic learning. These may include attitudinal barriers (e.g., feeling too old, too busy, or uninterested), pedagogical barriers (e.g., lack of instructional support to integrate new knowledge and skills), as well as academic barriers (e.g., rusty attention and memory skills, critical thinking and reflection skills) (McKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006).  The existence of the latter barriers indicate the importance of enhancing and nurturing academic learning skills among postgraduate students.

Studying for a higher degree requires the ability to assess ideas critically, and to rationalize beliefs and actions (Johnstone, 2008). As such skills weaken from lack of practice, it would be useful for professionals returning to academic study to relearn how to engage more deeply with subject matter, to question existing knowledge and ideas, and propose novel perspectives.  The challenge for me was to create opportunities to support my education postgraduates' critical engagement with course content, so that they would transition from surface learning to deeper learning.  This paper shares a classroom strategy that was put into practice for this purpose, and reports on the outcomes of its implementation. The strategy concerned incorporated the notions of assessment as learning and reflective writing.

### 1.1   Assessment as learning

Assessment as learning (AaL) is a learning-oriented form of assessment (Carless, 2007) that emphasizes metacognitive processes, i.e., students' thinking about their learning, and the strategies and mechanisms they use to support and advance learning (Earl, 2006). Dann, (2014, p. 150) observes that AaL "offers a process through which …involvement in assessment can feature as part of learning."  To facilitate rethinking and adjusting for further improvement, AaL tasks may incorporate opportunities for learners to self-assess the extent of their capabilities, including knowledge, level of understanding and strategies for learning (Earl, 2006).

Feedback is always an important feature in assessment. When relevant and timely feedback is incorporated into an AaL task, it is expected to 'feed forward' for students' learning enhancement (Carless, 2007). Besides conventional written feedback from peers or an instructor, rubrics can also be used since its core elements, namely criteria, quality indicators and score, help students not only to visualize what success at a task means, but also to make dependable judgements about the quality of their own work (Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Stiggins, in Andrade & Du, 2005).

## 1.2 Reflections

Sen (2010) draws attention to different types of reflective practice, and distinguishes between the nature of reflective writing for work situations and academic contexts. For academic learning, Moon (as cited in Sen, 2010) suggests that reflections would comprise a subject matter, a specified purpose, and the learning, action or clarification that is required from the learner. The inclusion of these components is consistent with the view that reflective writing is a means of learning how to learn (Bourner, 2003), or how to take ownership of ideas from lectures and academic books (Bolton, 2010). The fact that reflective writing expectations differ according to context also suggests that students who are more familiar with practical, professional reflections would benefit from some concrete guidance as they embark on reflective writing for academic learning. Guiding questions, for example, have been effectively applied to improve writing quality (Moussa-Inaty, 2015).

 Hatton and Smith (1995) classify reflective writing into four types:

(1) descriptive writing, which merely describes events or literature, and is therefore not reflective;
(2) descriptive reflection, which combines descriptions with justifications, and may reflect awareness of ideas from the literature in these justifications;
(3) dialogic reflection, which involves a more careful consideration of situations, and is characterized by judgements, alternative explanations or hypothesizing;
(4) critical reflection, in which there is recognition that perspectives and actions are influenced by contextual factors, and should be understood in relation to them.

Hatton and Smith's framework of reflective writing distinguishes between the depth of thinking involved during the reflective writing process, and allows the identification of levels of reflection achieved by students. Rivera (2017) suggests that these reflection types exist on a continuum. The same assumption is applied in this paper.

## 2. Aim

I believed that my postgraduate students needed to engage at a deeper level with content. To learn to do so, they should be able to critically assess their current way of engaging with new ideas and further utilize that knowledge for personal improvement (Earl, 2006).

This small classroom research explored the potential of using structured reflective writing to support the students' engagement with subject matter. I devised and implemented the task, and systematically gathered evidence to understand (a) the nature of students' reflections on content/subject matter over the task period, and (b) the influences of structured reflective writing on the students' learning.

## 3. Task Implementation

An intact class of 12 postgraduate students, comprising mainly primary to tertiary level English teachers participated in the reflective writing task as part of their assessed coursework. This paper reports on the reflective writing of six of the students, with 3 to 9 years of teaching experience, who were from the upper, middle and lower third of the class on course performance.

The task contributed 10% towards their total course marks, and was implemented in the following way: In the second week of class, students were 're-familiarized' with the expectations of reflection for academic learning via a student reflection guide and the assessment rubric that would be used for scoring their writing. The reflection guide comprised a selection of 'reflective writing sentence starters' adapted

from internet sources (see, for example, reflective-writing-sentence-starters.html). The students may use these 'stems' to structure responses that would fulfil the reflection elements, i.e., to record what was learned, give insights about the idea, show deeper thinking and draw conclusions. The reflection scoring rubric, accessible at any time, informed them of the assessment criteria--quality of content understanding and quality of reflection-- and related descriptors. Reflections were scored by me, on a range of 0-5 from novice, to amateur, to reflective. The students could refer to both the guide and the rubric at any time to facilitate their thinking-to-write.

Between weeks 3-10 of the semester, the students wrote four scheduled 15 to 20 minute reflections at the end of class, based on a specific question pertaining to the topic coverage of the day. Reflection 1 provided the baseline data on how the students reflected. In Week 11, they wrote a final reflection in which they provided reactions on having to undergo the reflection task.

Instructor feedback was provided a week before the following reflection. This comprised the individual scores on the rubric, written comments relating to their understanding of content, as well as direct or indirect suggestions for further improvement in the nature of reflection. The guide, rubric and feedback provided a structure to support learning and metacognitive processes.

## 4. Data Analysis and Findings

### 4.1 Nature of student reflections on content over the task period

The students' reflections and my written feedback to them were qualitatively analyzed against Hatton & Smith's (1995) framework. The students' baseline writing was found to be largely in the descriptive to descriptive reflective range. There was a tendency to summarize content from the class discussion and describe experiences. Based on the feedback data, areas that needed improvement included comprehension of concepts and (lack of) personal insights such as taking a stand, focusing and thinking through to add depth to personal views.

Before the second reflection task, the students were able to reassess their ability to reflect based on the lecturer's feedback. As they personally worked out how engage more deeply with the material, some students incorporated more personal and concrete examples of events and actions, but neglected to connect to concepts covered in class. Yet others attempted to demonstrate understanding of the material with a more elaborate theoretical description, but lacked concrete real life connections. Despite a slight improvement in the quality of writing, the second reflection was, as a whole, still mainly descriptive to descriptive reflective.

The feedback data from the third reflection showed that students still needed direction to think from different angles. However, there was some evidence of comprehension monitoring, as well as reflections of a more dialogic nature, such as questioning their own assumptions or expanding on their own interpretation of an idea.

In the fourth reflection, students' views and opinions tended to be more concrete and focused. There were clearer attempts at dialogic reflection such as venturing questions and issues, and speculating on impact. Elements of critical reflection, although sparse, did emerge in some explanations and justifications.

Overall, a positive change was observed in the nature of reflections over the time period, from mainly descriptive towards mainly dialogic. This suggests that while there were individual differences in quality, structured reflections with timely feedback had the potential to facilitate deeper thinking.

### 4.2 Influence of structured reflective writing on student learning

To explore the influences of the structured reflective writing on learning, the students' final reflections were analyzed thematically following Braun & Clarke (2006). The findings suggests that the reflective writing possibly influenced both metacognitive process as well as content of learning. Students reported that having to write reflectively led to increased attention during class, and also prompted self-assessment. Three forms of self-assessment emerged, as shown in the sample extracts below:

1. Level of understanding:
   "Every time I write the reflection, I am able to see where I stand, I mean how clear I understand the content of the topic I learned on that day." (S9)

2. Capacity as a student:
   " …reflect on my strengths and weakness as a student as well as a teacher." (S8)

3. Learning effort:
   "I am a last minute person…this activity has led me to the thought about consistency in readings, revising and checking my own learning." (S11)

In relation to content learning the recurring theme was 'drawing personal connections'. Students expressed that they thought deeper in order to relate newly learned concepts with existing knowledge and experiences, as suggested by the rubric descriptors ("…makes me to think deeply about my students." (S6)). Nonetheless, some pressure also was felt by being assessed, and by writing under time constraints ("I will be stressed up also thinking over what the questions will be and how to answer them" (S7)).

## 5. Conclusion

An assessment as learning strategy incorporating reflective writing was explored to guide and support students' towards deeper thinking about subject matter covered in a taught course. At the initial stage, writing was found to be mainly descriptive, consistent with an earlier finding (Gomez, as cited in Bolton, 2010, p.12) that education students' reflections were "unchallenging" and "non-risk taking," focusing on personal narratives and personal points of view. At the end of the task period, there was generally better engagement with content, despite individual differences in the quality and manner of reflection. The final outcome of the task supports the assertion that both reflective writing and learning oriented assessment positively influences self-development, metacognitive awareness and academic learning (Earl, 2006; Sen, 2010). It is also worth noting that writing in-class rather than take-home reflections might have had some effect as well. The anticipation of having to write on a topic immediately and be assessed on it probably led to attentiveness in class. Paying attention would have resulted in better understanding, which consequently enabled students to think, question and connect with the subject matter more meaningfully. As a student (S1) remarked in her final reflection, if she and her peers had been asked to write the reflections out of class, they would have had access to plenty of resources for ideas, or even to copy from. However, being forced to reflect "without any help from google or anything… we learn to understand."

## 6. Acknowledgements

## 7. References

Andrade, H. & Du, Y. (2005). Student perspectives on rubric referenced assessment. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 10* (3), 1-11.

Bolton, G. (2010). *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Bourner, T. (2003). Assessing Reflective Learning. *Education + Training*, 45 (5), 267-272 doi:10.1108/00400910310484321

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Research in Psychology, 3* (2), 77-101.

Carless, D. (2007). Learning–oriented assessment: conceptual bases and practical implications. *Innovations in Teaching and Learning International, 44* (1), 57-66

Dann, R. (2014). Assessment as learning: blurring the boundaries of assessment and learning for theory, policy and practice. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice, 21*(2), 149-166.

Earl, L. M. (2006). *Rethinking classroom assessment with purpose in mind*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth.

Hatton, N. & Smith, D. (1995). Teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Teaching & Teacher Education,11* (1), 33-49.

Johnstone, M. (2008). *Postgraduate students and critical thinking: Some validation*. Proceedings of the EDU-COM 2008 International Conference. Sustainability in Higher Education: Directions for Change. Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, 19-21 November 2008.

MacKeracher, D., Suart, T., & Potter, J. (2006). State of the field report - Barriers to participation in adult learning. Canada: University of New Brunswick.

Moussa-Inaty, J. (2015). Reflective writing through the use of guiding questions. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education,* 27 (1), 104-113.

Rivera, R. (2017). The reflective writing continuum: Re-conceptualizing Hatton & Smith's types of reflective writing. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 6*(2), 49-67

Sen, B. A. (2010). Reflective writing: a management skill. *Library Management, 31* (1/2) 79-93.