

FOURTH EDITION

THE STUDY SKILLS BOOK

**YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO UNIVERSITY SUCCESS**



DR KATHLEEN McMILLAN

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ERA model of reflective learning – case study	
<p>EXPERIENCE – What? <i>What was the situation?</i> <i>Who? What? When? Where?</i> <i>Why? How?</i></p>	<p>Last week, as part of my teaching practice placement, I was asked to be present at a parents' night for the parents of children in the middle years of primary school. My university tutor asked me to observe how parents reacted to being in school and to suggest ways in which the parents' night could be developed as an effective forum for communication with staff.</p> <p>I joined the parents assembled in the school hall for an introductory talk by the head teacher on the subjects of fundraising and the development of the School Newsletter. Samples of the children's work decorated the walls. Parents were invited to view these examples while they waited for their appointments with the class teachers. Some parents had brought their children with them. I thought that it was quite a social occasion.</p> <p>I began my observation in the main hall and then I did four stints of 30 minutes each in four different classrooms. Each teacher introduced me to the parents as a final-year trainee teacher and they were asked if they minded if I was present for their interview with the class teacher. No parents objected.</p> <p>I noticed that there were many more chairs in the hall than there were parents. It seemed that the attendance was only about 40% and some parents I spoke to later suggested that an evening meeting caused babysitting problems, so it seemed to me that only one parent could attend in some cases. Babysitting appeared to be a problem, and I could see that some of the teachers found it inhibiting to talk with the child present. Apart from changing the times of parents' nights or offering day-time slots, there seems little way of confronting this issue.</p>
<p><i>Incident for reflection</i></p>	<p>I thought that the individual interviews were varied. One teacher had a stopwatch on the desk and made it clear when time was up. In that person's sessions, I felt that the parents were given short shrift as the teacher would only 'talk to' the script of the written school report. I could see that for the parents whose child had special educational needs (SEN), this was unhelpful. The teacher was only willing to discuss the child's attainment in general, claiming that the SEN issues were 'not my job'. There were no SEN staff present who could provide in-depth information as to actions and progress for their child. I was quite concerned and upset for those parents. I'd just done a course on teaching children with dyslexia and it was frustrating for me not to be able to give answers to some of the parents' questions on learning support materials for dyslexia that I know in detail. I suggested to the teacher that perhaps I could speak with the parents outside about this, but I was told that I couldn't do that as I was not a fully-trained teacher.</p>
<p><i>Negative feelings</i></p>	
<p><i>Positive feelings</i></p>	<p>One of the other teachers was more experienced and ignored the written report entirely. I was delighted to hear her joke about the child and to offer suggestions about what the parents could do to help him with his maths at home by suggesting that they could get him to work out score averages for all the league table football teams. The other two teachers in the interviews that I observed provided clear information and recommendations that seemed to please the parents.</p>

Figure 16.2 A sample report in reflective writing style, based on the ERA framework. This is a truncated version of a student's reflective report, but it models the writing style expected.

<p>REFLECTION – So what?</p> <p><i>Impressions</i></p> <p><i>Conjecturing; raising questions</i></p> <p><i>Relating theoretical evidence to the situation</i></p> <p><i>Feelings and opinions</i></p>	<p>My initial impression was that I couldn't help feeling that the whole exercise was designed to 'divide and conquer' the parent body so that, apart from the initial appeal to support fundraising and to look to the School Newsletter for information, there was very little opportunity for interactive communication with the collective but diverse parent group. I didn't see any representatives of a parent-teacher association.</p> <p>From what I could see, where the parents had children in different classes, they found it difficult to ensure that they were able to meet with each of the class teachers. The result was that the parents split up so that at least one of them was able to meet with the class teacher of each child. There seemed to be little opportunity to explore what the parents' views were regarding their children's education. They seemed to be more or less passive participants in this exercise. I think that this raises some important questions about why this is the case. Do parents revert to their own 'pupil-hood' and are intimidated by the school building, its conventions and their memories of their own schooling? Lanos (2019) suggests that the tightly disciplined behaviour of the earlier generations of schoolchildren has left a mark on how adults actually react to any building where education takes place; she claims that they revert to an unquestioning mode of obedience. Anecdotal evidence compiled by Murray (2015) confirms that parents find it difficult to be proactive in these meetings. She notes that trying to elicit information from staff in such a short interview seems to be impossible and sometimes is obstructed. Her solution is to resolve this is by arranging for a longer appointment outside school hours, which is often not viable for staff or parents.</p> <p>I was really angry about the parents of the SEN child not being given the opportunity to speak with the SEN specialist and additionally angry that the class teacher rejected any questions about the SEN learning activities. I felt that this was unprofessional as the teacher didn't even suggest setting up an appointment for the parents with the SEN teacher. That's what I would have done. I don't think this complements the 'growth mindset' school philosophy.</p>
<p>ACTION – Now what?</p> <p><i>Planning for and creating change</i></p>	<p>I think there would be some value in investigating what kinds of questions parents have; what information they seek; and how beneficial they find these parents' nights. Based on my experience, if as Lawson (2010) has suggested 'Communication with parents is the most effective learning tool that teachers possess', then this tool is a very blunt one that needs urgent honing. This study has changed my views on the value of parents' night meetings.</p> <p>With the permission of the head teacher, I propose to conduct a survey of parents in my placement school to identify ways in which they feel that communication with the school could be improved. With the support of the school SEN specialist staff, I also want to create an information pack for parents of pupils with dyslexia so that they can learn about the use of dyslexia-friendly fonts, voice recognition, other oral/aural aids as well as computer resources that can help the child to develop strategies for learning so that they are not limited by their dyslexia. I am hopeful that this could become a resource that could be rolled out to other schools in the area.</p> <p>My aspiration would be that the communication with parents could improve and the growth mindset approach strengthen by the creation of other specialist packs on other learning issues. If followed through, my pack initiative would give parents more information to help them and their children than they would ever get in a 10-minute interview in a cold school on a winter's evening.</p>

Figure 16.2 (cont'd)

ASSESSMENT OF REFLECTIVE WRITING – A CHECKLIST

The way that you are assessed, in part, will be a response to the situation and experience that you're reporting, but the person assessing your work will have a particular set of things that they will be hoping to see. This will vary according to the way you have been taught in your subject, the level of task and the departmental guidelines that you will have been given or will be on your module VLE. You should try to ensure that your text incorporates the following features.

Your text

- Present your ideas in a logical order and using complete sentences and paragraphs.
- Keep to the prescribed length and ensure that the ERA elements are well balanced so that no one aspect dominates the others – sometimes less is more.
- Be sure that the language you use is not overly colloquial and informal.

Your ideas

- Report the event(s) by providing enough description to explain the situation but not so much that it overwhelms the work.
- Give an honest outline of events and assess your reaction to them.
- Demonstrate that self-questioning and self-awareness have been part of the process.
- Show that you have considered the reasons for and consequences of the events.
- Show that you have followed a process of critical thinking.
- Provide explanations that are based on your own experience and the study of reputable sources.
- Reflect on ways in which your own views have been altered or consolidated by the study and the events surrounding it.
- Identify ways in which your learning has developed through this study.



The importance of developing reflective writing skills

Often, your university assessments are not just transient tasks within your course, they are often a cornerstone of your professional training. Thus, reflective learning assignments and the compilation of your Personal Development Plan (PDP) are important for your future career. When you are working in your chosen field, you'll find that often your career progress will depend on completing continuing professional development activities involving reflective writing.

This chapter extends from the previous chapter on critical thinking and has explored the related dimensions of reflective thinking and writing. The more traditional features of academic writing will be covered in Part 3. The next few chapters consider how to learn well with others.



PRACTICAL TIPS FOR REFLECTIVE THINKING AND WRITING

- **Allocate sufficient time to reflective tasks.** Creating, collecting and collating material for reflective learning tasks is potentially both engrossing and time-consuming. Be conscious that your time is limited as you'll have other assignments to complete. There is some merit in reviewing and organising the material you're collecting on a regular basis so that you are not confronted with an overwhelming amount of data when you reach the writing stage. Create and try to work to a timetable on this kind of assignment.
- **Keep a record of your study.** Where a study is taking place over time, it is wise to keep a notebook to record your ideas and impressions. Write in full sentences rather than in one-word bullet points; your notes need to make sense to you maybe weeks after you made them. In some instances, such a log of events and thinking might be required as part of the submission.
- **Planning your reflective writing.** This kind of assignment is not an exact science – the models of construction and content are infinite and defined by the circumstances you're reporting. Nevertheless, the ERA model provides you with a starting point for conducting your reflection, and you should evolve your plan based on these elements, in the correct order, to make your report comprehensive and coherent. This will give you the confidence to present a report that meets the standards required by your department.
- **Carry on reflecting.** Your learning is not a static thing but is ongoing, and throughout the reflective exercise you should consciously continue to relate the theory to practice in light of the events you have observed and your interpretation of them.

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING

How to study successfully with others

University education involves learning for yourself, but this doesn't mean that you have to do it alone. Support networks can help. Your fellow students are a learning resource for you, and you for them. By studying together in groups formally and informally you can develop mutually supportive 'learning networks' with others on your course. This chapter looks at ways in which these networks can contribute to your learning, both online and in person.

Learning in a group has advantages. Instead of listening passively as an isolated individual in a lecture, in a group you'll probably find that you're working together interactively with others – in person, online or via social media. Such groups work because of the different personalities and learning styles represented in them. If everyone in the group were the same, it is likely that the group would be rather dull; instead, each person brings something unique and this adds to its effectiveness. It is the interaction of diverse personalities and learning types that creates a 'group dynamic', with members feeding off each other's ideas, working more intensively and, at times, competing with each other. More recent changing requirements relating to face-to-face working may mean that tutorials take place using electronic conferencing or discussion threads on the module VLE, although there may be other possibilities that apply to your situation.

FORMAL (STAFF-SELECTED) GROUPS

Studying formally as a group normally means that you are participating in a learning activity that has been initiated by an academic staff member. This could be a formal tutorial online, lab activity or practical facilitated by a tutor, or it may take the form of a group project that is conducted independently of the staff member. In all these situations, it is likely that you will have had little choice in the composition of the group. For effective learning to take place, however, you will have to adopt the basic practices described in this chapter.



Groupwork tips

There are ground rules for working effectively as a group, whether in a formal or informal setting, in real time or following an online discussion thread.

- Learn to listen as well as speak; to read as well as write.
- Respect the views of others and understand that criticism of your views is not a personal slight.
- Ensure that everyone is allowed space and time to give their views.
- Prevent anyone from dominating the discussion or activity.

Staff-led groups

- Ensure that you're prepared adequately for the group activity and that you don't just 'wing it' by reacting spontaneously to the contributions of others.
- Participate in the discussion and don't leave one or two people to do all the talking (or making written contributions, if online).
- Have the confidence to express your views, even if these seem to be at odds with those of others; if online or through the VLE, for example, your tutor will be able to monitor the discussion and the participation level of each student. Not participating may reflect poorly on your assessment for tutorial participation (if this is applicable).
- Be prepared to defend your views or suggestions with reasoned arguments supported by well-considered evidence.
- Use the group-learning experience as an opportunity to explore issues or ideas in greater depth with an expert to guide you.
- Recognise that a tutor may act as 'devil's advocate' to push you into exploring alternative scenarios, options or strategies as an exercise in critical thinking ([Ch 15](#)).
- Take notes in these meetings, as these will complement your lecture notes and additional reading. They may also cause you to reflect on your own understanding or opinions.

Unsupervised student groups

- Such groups may be encouraged as part of the learning programme, so that students can work less formally and possibly more effectively.
- Agree on the purpose of the group activity.
- Quickly work out and agree some ground rules: set goals, responsibilities, deadlines.
- Ensure that the work allocation is evenly distributed across the group.
- Create a positive learning environment by addressing the task in hand and ensuring that people do not feel constrained in presenting their ideas.
- Engage in analytical thinking to tackle the task in hand.
- Encourage everyone to contribute ideas.
- Encourage exploration of ideas, their implications and also counter-arguments.
- Ask others in the group to explain things you may be finding difficult to understand.
- Agree that assigned contributions are completed for presentation at the next meeting.