

# Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations  
across a Range of Genres

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## CHAPTER 18

### REVEALING THE PROCESS

#### *Reflective Essays*

*Reflection, like language itself, is social as well as individual. Through reflection, we tell our stories of learning. (Yancey, 1998, 53)*

*We believe that the time has come both to legitimate critical reflection as a form of scholarly writing about teaching and learning, and also to make all SoTL writing more explicitly reflective—making space for the conditional and the human aspects of our inquiries and our partnerships. (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 23)*

Have you had an experience of learning or teaching that you want to examine for how it has informed your own thinking or practice? Do you want to write for readers in an informal and personal way without necessarily having to situate your experience and what you learned from it in published research? Might you want to use your writing not only to capture what you already understand about the experience but also to learn further? If you answered “yes” to any or all of these questions, you may want to consider writing a reflective essay for publication. If you want to tell a story of your learning, as Kathleen Blake Yancey suggests reflection allows, you can join the growing number of people helping to legitimate this genre of writing, as Alison and her colleagues, Sophia Abbot and Peter Felten, suggest it is time to do. We use the term “reflective essay” to refer to a particular genre—a personal, contemplative, critical analysis based

on lived experience but not necessarily grounded in your own data or others' research. We are not referring to expository essays or "disciplined provocations" (Academy of Management Learning & Education Editorial Team 2018, 397) but rather to a form of essay writing that allows both authors and readers to explore more freely.

Such explorations can both reveal and further learning. As Jenny Moon (2013, 80) puts it: "We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting." Her emphasis on the educative power of reflection echoes that of John Dewey (1933, 6), who framed reflection in learning as an intellectual undertaking characterized by "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends." David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker (1985) introduced emotion into this intellectual process, suggesting that reflection entails not only returning to an experience for the purposes of evaluation but also attending to or connecting with feelings associated with that experience. Tacking between experience and interpretation, or what Donald Schön (1987) called "reflection-in-action," is demanding intellectual and emotional work. It includes analyzing "prior understandings which have been implicit" (Schön 1987, 68) and making them explicit such that they can more intentionally inform future action. These iterative processes are messy and unpredictable, and the results are not provable in any scientific sense. While learning theory tells us that such processes are the heart of learning (Illeris 2018), writing about them rarely finds a place in traditional forms of scholarship. That's where reflective essays come in as a particular form of meaning making.

A growing number of scholars are arguing that "much academic discourse limits practitioners' and readers' opportunities to engage in the very critical reflection and knowledge construction that are, ostensibly, the desired outcomes of a rigorous approach" (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 16; see also Sword 2009). Such arguments contend that traditional forms and conventions of scholarship are neither broad nor inclusive enough to represent the complexity and nuance of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Bernstein

and Bass 2005; McKinney 2007) and prevent us from seeing learning and teaching from a wide range of perspectives (Manarin 2017). We see very different sides of learning and teaching if we bring emotion and identity more centrally into our writing (Sword 2017a) and make space for analyses of “who we are and how we got to be this way” (Gravett and Bernhagen 2018, 2). In her work to “re-theorize Donald Schön’s theory of reflection for use in the writing classroom,” Kathleen Blake Yancey (1998, vi) argues for thinking about how we might “use reflection as a mode of helping students develop as writers.” Building on this re-theorizing, we argue that reflective essays invite all authors, not only students in writing classrooms, to share the messy, unfinished, personal work of living and to critically analyze learning and teaching as those authors experience that work.

In this chapter we discuss what the reflective genre can accomplish, spell out what to strive for and what to avoid in writing a reflective essay, offer recommendations and a framework of guiding questions for planning, revising, and refining a reflective essay for publication, and note where to find examples of reflective essays.

### **What Can the Reflective Genre Accomplish?**

While traditional scholarly writing requires that authors focus on crafting original, logical arguments substantiated or proven by bodies of data and situated within the literature, reflective writing makes space for idiosyncratic, still emerging, or intellectually and emotionally vulnerable presentations not generally welcome in traditional scholarly writing (Sword 2009). As one faculty scholar wrote:

The informal nature of the reflective genre of writing lowers the bar for participation in sharing ideas, with the result of increasing the number of participants whose experiences are shared. As a scientist by training, I had no time, education, or inclination to prepare a rigorous academic treatise on my experiences in the classroom; but the reflective genre allowed me to share the experiences and ideas . . . with a wide academic audience

who may benefit from these insights. (Quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 20).

Equally important, reflective writing can contribute to efforts to combat systems and practices of domination (hooks 2003) because, according to one student author, it gives “marginalized students more of a voice” and “helps us realize that our voices matter, our stories matter, we matter” (student author quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 23).

Reflective writing can also be more accessible to readers. As a student scholar argued, “[It] has the unique power to draw readers in, regardless of their positionality or experiences, because it allows the reader to imagine herself or himself in the shoes of the writer” (quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 22). Such accessibility is particularly important for student readers if we want to “take students seriously as an audience” for SoTL (McKinney 2012b, 4) or any published writing about learning and teaching.

### **What Should You Strive for and What Should You Avoid?**

Reflective essays are written as informal, first-person accounts; they show, as opposed to tell, through offering vivid, detailed examples instead of simply stating that something happened. They offer analysis of lived experience that illuminates the day-to-day practicalities of the work and insights gained into the potential of such work in higher education. Such analyses might include offering explanations and interpretations (not assuming examples speak for themselves); making assumptions explicit; clearly articulating insights and conclusions; and making connections across points. Finally, because they focus on lived experience, reflective essays include a small number of citations of existing literature, rather than the extensive number expected in some other genres.

Reflective essays present analyses of lessons derived from experience and explain how those lessons have affected you. They include personal statements that reveal uncertainty, complexity, and challenge as well as new understanding and excitement. Candid acknowledgments of the messiness of the work upon which authors reflect can

model brave, engaged, responsive practice in learning and teaching in higher education; they can assure academics, staff, and students alike that their “experiences, sometimes doubt or difficulties, are communal and not just individual hurdles” (student author quoted in Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 21).

Given reflective writing’s emphasis on personal experience and emotional as well as intellectual insight, you should **avoid**:

- Writing in a distanced (third-person, “objective”) voice about your own or others’ work
- Focusing too much on subject matter or research outcomes and not enough on *experiences*, both positive and negative
- Describing what happened rather than conveying what those experiences felt like
- Including extensive references to theoretical frameworks and other scholarship rather than digging into your own partially formed, messy, contradictory perspectives
- Presenting content-based outcomes and implications rather than the details of exploring, experimenting, and struggling through the process necessary to achieve them.

### **How Might You Go about Writing a Reflective Essay?**

Writing a reflective essay requires a mindset and style that differ from much other scholarly writing. It is premised on your being willing to take a hard look at your own assumptions and experiences. Taking such a hard look means wrestling with the ways of thinking and being you might take for granted and that are challenged when you begin to analyze them. It also means acknowledging conflicts and even contradictions when you consciously and intentionally identify and examine your thoughts and experiences. Reflective writing can, therefore, “be a means of becoming clearer about something” (Moon 2006, 2).

One of the greatest challenges of reflective writing is finding language to name all of these things that are not typically addressed in forms of writing privileged in Western academic contexts. Reflective essays afford authors a space to share publicly what they have

experienced and discovered. They need not be confessional or overly vulnerable making, but they do require a certain amount of bravery since, depending on one's discipline, revealing any uncertainty can be dangerous. For this reason, some scholars choose to publish their essays anonymously (Anonymous 2014). This point links to our discussion in [chapter 4](#) about developing an identity or identities as a writer.

In contrast to empirical research articles, reflective essays neither marshal evidence to prove something nor strive to convince anyone of anything in particular. Instead, they aim to offer readers glimpses of the messy, unfinished, personal work of learning and teaching—the lived experience and the sense people make of it—so the argument is more an assertion of what is worthy of attention. Reflective essays may or may not draw on data, although they certainly draw on lived experiences, and they aim to make an argument in the sense of enacting a process of interpretation of that experience and reasoning regarding its importance. The reasoning is of an affective as well as analytical kind—a coherent explanation and declaration more than a contention or defence.

Because the reflective essay genre is unfamiliar to many authors, it can be helpful to draw on guidelines for how to approach it. In “A Short Guide to Reflective Writing” the University of Birmingham (2015) defines what reflective writing is and why it is important, offers a model of reflection, and provides short examples of reflective writing. Similarly, Monash University (n.d.) offers a resource called “[Reflective Writing in Education](#)” in which they discuss the purpose and structure of reflective writing in education and offer several illustrative examples. Using guides such as these and the framework we offer below can support you in moving your writing through multiple revisions in order to find words to name those qualities of experience and insights that are typically not given voice in publications—experiences of struggle, uncertainty, and risk-taking, and insights that are idiosyncratic, still emerging, or intellectually and emotionally vulnerable.

Below we offer a set of guiding questions for planning, revising, and refining a reflective essay for publication annotated with further

explanation and examples. A copy of the framework with just the questions is [available in the online resources](#).

## **Guiding Questions for Planning, Revising, and Refining a Reflective Essay\***

### **1. What situation, scenario, or event are you reflecting upon?**

Give readers a sense of the focus of your essay. What set of circumstances, precipitating event or ongoing process, or catalyst for exploration and analysis prompted you to write the essay? Consider opening with some sort of vivid image or intriguing statement, such as:

“I don’t know anything about chemistry,” I thought, as I read an email informing me that my first placement as a student consultant with the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program would be in an organic chemistry lab. I was a political science major. What could possibly qualify me to work with a STEM professor? (Daviduke 2018, 151)

### **2. Who is doing the reflection and what are their roles in the situation, scenario, or event?**

Identify authors up front, giving as much detail as is appropriate and necessary for readers to understand the position and perspective from which they are writing. Does the piece have a single author? What role did that person play? Does it have multiple authors? Do they write in one voice or multiple voices? For example, one reflective essay opens with this explanation by two academic and two student authors:

The following is our collective attempt—staff- and student-centric, both in terms of outcomes and reporting—to unpack the complexities of our collaborative endeavour in 2017. We juxtapose our respective experiences of navigating the “normative hierarchical

university paradigm” (Mercer–Mapstone et al. 2017a, 18) to present a more collaborative and balanced discussion of our partnership. (MacFarlane et al. 2018, 144)

### **3. What is the broad teaching and learning context of your reflection?**

Give a sense of the kind of institution, geographical location, cultural norms, etc. within which you are writing. For instance:

At the time of this project, I (Tanya) was working at the Edinburgh University Students’ Association, supporting student representation, and I (Hermina) was a first-year student representative from the School of Health in Social Science. It was through a University of Edinburgh Innovative Initiative Grant project related to Tanya’s PhD research (focusing on co-creation of the curriculum) that we began to work together closely. (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Simoni 2018, 157)

### **4. What prompted your reflection on this topic or situation?**

It is helpful to readers to know why you were inspired to write the reflective essay. For instance, Liz Dunne, Derfel Owen, Hannah Barr, Will Page, James Smith, and Sabina Szydlo (2014) wanted to reveal the behind-the-scenes process that led to the establishment of an institutional initiative that became an international inspiration and to tell the story through the voices of those who might not otherwise have been heard:

“Students as Change Agents” at the University of Exeter is an initiative that has become extremely successful, impacts strongly on the way that students are listened to and work in partnership at the University, and is beginning to influence ideas and practices nationally and internationally. Perhaps as with many such initiatives, the story of this success has been dependent on the commitment of individuals who have believed in

its philosophy and values and who have contributed to making it work.

This piece outlines the development and growth of Students as Change Agents from the perspectives of six key players. It highlights some of the “back story,” the times before the initiative was successful, the long journey and the voices of some of the people who have supported this development, from the first seeds of an idea to a major institutional initiative. (Dunne et al. 2014, 1)

### **5. How did you structure your approach to reflection?**

Sharing the details of your approach can help make visible the context within which and the process through which you developed your reflection. These need not take the form of methodological defences; rather, they model approaches to reflection. For instance:

We decided to draft individual written reflections of our experiences co-facilitating . . . guided by two questions:

1. In your opinion, what worked in our co-facilitation process and approach? Why did it work?
2. In your opinion, what did not work in our co-facilitation process and approach? Why did it not work and what should we have done differently?

We shared and read these written reflections and then met to “reflect on our reflections.” . . . We discussed how they resonated as a group, and what seemed worth elaborating on. . . . Ultimately, we continued to come back to prominent threads across our reflections that resonated with us all: idealism and conflict, and labels and leadership. (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017b, 2)

**6. How can you convey to readers the particulars of your experience rather than assume familiarity with or understanding of how the experience unfolded?**

Be sure to show rather than tell—to create vivid scenarios and analyses that reveal rather than just describe what you learned, such as:

I was sitting with people who have been involved in this area of practice for a long time, reminding us where things had started. At the same table, a student shared her own understandings of partnership based on her own very recent experiences. The conversations, sometimes characterized by conflict and at other times by consensus, reminded me of the importance of individual experience and the need to collectively develop understandings of what partnership means to a particular group of people, within a particular setting, at a particular time. (Brost et al. 2018, 134)

**7. What did you learn from the reflection that others can benefit from reading about?**

Every reflective essay will have different lessons to share, and it is helpful at some point in the essay to make explicit what you learned and what you are sharing with readers. For instance, a student author writes at the opening of his essay:

Through my time working with my faculty partner, I learned pedagogical tools, discovered new ways to enhance my own learning, and formed a friendship. In this essay I share a number of the pedagogical issues my faculty partner and I explored and how these explorations transformed my own learning. (Wynkoop 2018, 1)

*\*As with other sets of guiding questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your*

audience. The questions are based on those in Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019, 37).

### **Where to Find Examples of Reflective Essays**

The genre of reflective essay is designated as such in two journals—*International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)* and *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)*—and other journals include reflective writing but may not name it as such. For *IJSaP*, authors have written reflective essays that “zoom in” on different moments and lived experiences of partnership (Brost et al. 2018); detail the launching and development of student–faculty pedagogical partnership programs (Goldsmith et al. 2017); and unpack the complexities of a collaborative undertaking (Macfarlane et al. 2018). With some exceptions for guest-edited issues, *TLTHE* is devoted almost entirely to reflective essays. Guest-edited issues often focus on themes, such as “Growing Deep Learning,” an issue edited by Ken Bain (2013), and “Crossing Thresholds Together,” an issue edited by Peter Felten (2013). They might also present the work of faculty, staff, and students in a particular institution or geographical location, such as Italy (Frison and Melacarne 2017) and Australia (Matthews 2017). The reflective essays in *TLTHE* aim to offer windows onto the development of pedagogical insights that academics and students gain when they collaborate on explorations of classroom practice and systematically reflect on that collaboration. Some of the ideas discussed in this chapter may also help you write applications for fellowships and teaching awards where the criteria emphasize evidence of reflective practice (see chapter 22).

### **Over to You**

Reflective essays combine stories of lived experiences with critical analysis of those experiences to produce accessible representations of learning and teaching. They invite you to share more personal stories of who you are as a learner and teacher, and they allow you to develop a voice for naming the emotions as well as the insights

generated through learning and teaching. Questions to ask about writing reflective essays include:

- What experience of learning or teaching might you examine for how it has informed your own thinking or practice?
- What aspects of your experience of learning or teaching might best be conveyed through first-person, informal narrative and analysis?
- How can you engage in, as well as model, learning through writing in this genre?