



Reflective writing for the MA in Academic Practice

Types of reflective writing in the MA in Academic Practice (MAAP)

You might be asked to write about:

- ◆ Your experiences of teaching
- ◆ Your experiences during the course (for example, tackling an assessment, working in a group)

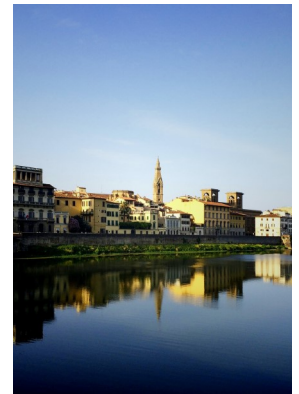
How is reflective writing different from other academic writing?

The main difference is that whilst in many kinds of academic writing, the evidence you use to support or construct the points that you make comes from published literature and research, in reflective writing, you also use another form of evidence – your own reflections on your experiences.

Just like when you use other kinds of evidence, we'll expect you to use your own reflections critically – so this might involve using research or theories to try to explain things that you have observed, or explaining how your own experiences are similar or different from what you might expect from a particular theory or from a published study.

In some academic writing (perhaps in your own subject area) you might not be able to use the first person (I) or refer to feelings or emotions – these things are encouraged in reflective writing.

In reflective writing, you will therefore use your experiences as well as your reading to engage with and analyse the ideas we discuss during the MAAP.



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Why do we use reflective writing in the MAAP?

Our intention for all modules on the MAAP is that they will enable and empower you to develop your teaching and academic practice. We believe that one of the best ways to do this is by reflecting on your current teaching practices – by including reflective writing as activities during the modules, or as part of some of the assessments, we intend to assist this process by giving you the opportunities and prompts for reflection. We know that all our participants are studying our modules alongside many other responsibilities, and that reflection is something that otherwise might easily slip down the priority list.

How do you reflect on your experiences?



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You might regularly reflect as part of your professional practice, you might have had to reflect as part of a previous course you studied, or you might be completely new to reflection. If reflection is something you're not used to, often using particular models to help with reflection can be very useful. If you've already comfortable with particular models or ways of reflecting, you might want to stick to these – or you might want to try some new models to see if they provide a slightly different perspective. The following models could be useful to enable your reflections.

Borton's model of reflection

This model, from Terry Borton, is attractive by virtue of its simplicity. It centres around just three questions, so it's easy to remember and is especially good to prompt a quick reflection after an event, such as when you finish a teaching session.

The questions are:

- ◆ What?
- ◆ So what?
- ◆ Now what?

The first question, 'what?' prompts you to think about the details of one of the key events that you've experienced. The next question, 'so what?' asks you to think about why that event is significant and analyse the reasons for it happening in that way. The final question, 'now what?', invites you to think about what you'd change as a result of reflecting on your experience.

An example reflection using Borton's model

Changes following reflection don't have to be revolutionary—small adjustments can be very beneficial

Imagine that you came out of a seminar feeling annoyed. The 'what?' is that the back table of students were chatting and laughing throughout. So what? Does this matter? Well, you were concerned that it was disturbing other students, or that the noisy group might not have been fully engaged with their learning. Your initial thoughts could just be that these students are rude or trying to wind you up, but when you try and see things from their point of view, you might wonder if the group didn't fully understand what they needed to do, or if they finished early and didn't know what to do next. They possibly were even getting on with things, and just enjoying what they were doing and didn't realise it affected anyone else! So your answer to 'now what?' might involve a few different strategies: reminding students of how their behaviour can impact others; spending more time checking understanding of class tasks; and making sure students know that you have extension tasks available.

In this example, the reflection resulted in quite a few possible changes to your teaching for the next session. This doesn't always have to be the case; it might be that making a very small adjustment might result in a significant change in class behaviour. It's also useful to concentrate on the positive aspects as well as things that you felt could have gone better – in the previous example, it seemed that most of the groups got on with the task as envisaged, so it's just as beneficial to acknowledge the reasons for things going well for these students, even though our natural reaction is to focus on the students who aren't acting in the way we'd expect them to.

Gibbs's and Borton's reflective models

One of the most frequently used models for reflection on teaching is Graham Gibbs's. This can nicely map onto Borton's model, so that it is effectively giving you some sub-questions to consider for each of Borton's three main questions. In this way, the 'what?' is expanded to 'description [what happened]' and 'feelings [your thoughts and emotions]'; the 'so what?' is expanded to 'evaluation [the good and bad parts of the situation]' and 'analysis [what sense you can make of the situation]'; and the 'now what?' is expanded to 'conclusion [thinking about what else you could have done]' and 'action plan [what you will do differently next time]'.



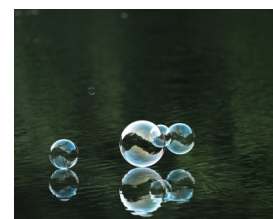
Which style you find more productive is down to personal preference. You might like the simplicity of Borton's model, or you might like the extra prompts from Gibbs. It's useful to try them both out a few times to see which you get on with best. Perhaps they work best in different situations – Borton for a quicker reflection, and Gibbs for when you want to spend more time thinking about an event.

Reflection is cyclical

One important aspect of both the previous models is their cyclical nature. Teaching is something that can always be developed, especially as our students and their identities and needs are ever changing. So reflection is never about making a change and then resting on our laurels, content in the knowledge that we've now cracked this session and have created the perfect learning experience. Instead, it's about having a go at different approaches, seeing what works and what doesn't to enable improvements, and keeping on doing this.

The process of reflection, however, is certainly not meant to turn teaching into something Sisyphean and overwhelming. You don't need to review every single moment you teach, nor do you have to take a whole new approach for each session – not only would this give you a completely unsustainable workload, but it would also be quite confusing for your students! Instead, reflective teaching is about taking regular opportunities to think about what kinds of things are enabling learning, and any issues that you are encountering, and then making some adjustments – often these can be quite small, such as making sure you greet your students as they enter the room, or spending a little more time discussing assessment criteria.

Reflection is never about making a single change and then resting on our laurels



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Manouchehri's reflective model



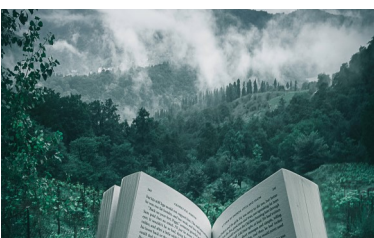
Robyn Budlender,
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An alternative and more recent model is from Azita Manouchehri, who sees reflection as storytelling – it's part of our instincts as people to tell stories about the things that happen to us, to make sense of them. She suggests that reflections can be seen as adding different layers to the story, in effect fleshing things out and adding more detail, in the same way that we might storm back into our shared office, declaring 'that's it, I just can't teach that group anymore!' before gradually letting our colleagues know what it is that's upset us so much.

The layers that Manouchehri identifies are:

- ◆ **Describing** – telling the story of what happened
- ◆ **Explaining** – why it happened, bringing together similar incidents in the explanation
- ◆ **Theorising** – the reasoning behind your explanation, which might come from research and learning theories as well as your own experiences
- ◆ **Confronting** – trying to move away from your instinctive reactions or simple explanations – could there be other ways of looking at this? Can you try and see things from your students' perspectives? Are there ideas in the research that you want to reject because they make you feel uncomfortable - is there a reason for this? Do they challenge some of your values or beliefs?
- ◆ **Restructuring** – how can you rearrange some of the elements of your story, or add in something new, to make a different outcome next time? This might mean making use of many of the original elements, but weaving them together in a slightly altered fashion.

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more open to new
ideas, we might
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ourselves



Kourosh Qaffari,
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One of the key differences with Manouchehri's model, and the reason it might be particularly effective, is the notion of 'confronting'. It's sometimes tempting to pay lip service to the notion of reflection, and to experience it as a superficial activity. The most valuable reflections, however, are often the ones where we try and move away from simplistic solutions, or ones which reinforce our own assumptions about what teaching or learning might look like. If we try to be more open to new ideas, we might experience real change within ourselves that can be a lightbulb moment in the ways we think about education.

Brookfield's four lenses

Another important aspect of the layers described by Manouchehri is that it directly refers to moving outside of our own thoughts and incorporating some of the research literature or others' perspectives to expand our ideas about the situation. In a similar way, Stephen Brookfield has suggested that effective reflections incorporate four different lenses, or ways of looking at an event:

1. Our own experience
2. Putting ourselves in the shoes of our students
3. Discussing with colleagues to see what they have made of similar occurrences, or their peer review of your teaching
4. Theory and research into the issues

If you're doing a quick reflection after a session, you might not always be able to look at everything that happens through all of these lenses. But if you're repeatedly experiencing a particular problem, or are struggling to make sense of something, then it can be really beneficial to expand your reflection in this way.



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How to move from thoughts to writing

It might feel a bit intimidating at first to write reflectively – you might be uncertain about how much detail to include, or how to phrase things. There's often several stages that you might go through between reflecting on an experience and writing about it.

First, you might want to prepare for your writing by collecting some of your experiences. You might want to keep some sort of 'reflective journal' to enable you to take time to pause, reflect and record after your teaching so that you remember your thoughts and emotions. This doesn't have to be something formal – perhaps using a 'Notes' app on our phones to record a few pertinent reactions after a teaching session.

Then you might want to go through an organising and selection process to choose the most significant experiences or aspects of your experiences for the writing you're going to do. You might want to organise this as a mind map, or use a table similar to the one overleaf.



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Reflection table

You might have been asked to write a forum post about using technology in your teaching, so you could start filling a table with some of your recent experiences as follows:

Event/ experience	Key emotions/ learning points	Links to theories/ research
Using PollEverywhere for the first time	Was great to see people respond and almost everyone take part. I found it a bit difficult to know how long to give people to respond.	
Using breakout rooms in Zoom	I was really frustrated that so many people didn't turn up for the session so the groups I'd created had to be redone. When I visited the rooms, it seemed to take people ages to get going with the discussion and everyone went silent when I came in.	Gilly Salmon's five stages? Research about building communities?
Using Teams	Feel very comfortable with this software now and students are happy with it.	

From doing this sort of exercise, you can quickly begin to see which experiences might be the most productive for further attention, so you can choose one of these to expand upon (in the example above, it feels like the experience with breakout rooms could be a good choice for reflection as there's lots to think about – e.g. why might the discussions take a while to get going, and how might the rooms be run differently?). Then, you can use a reflective model to enhance the richness of your thinking and provide you with prompts to expand your analysis of the situation. At this stage, you might want to do some free writing (which means just letting yourself write for a set period, e.g. five or ten minutes, without worrying about how 'good' the writing is or whether it's 'academic') just to help you record your thoughts.

Once you have some material to work with you can then edit it to make it fit the requirements of reflective writing for an MA course. Remember, one of the key things in a reflection is to show that you've thought about the reasons for what happened, and what you've learnt from the experience – what does your analysis of the situation, and relevant theories or research suggest that you might do differently in the future?

What we look for in reflective writing for the MAAP

The most effective reflective writing that we see on our course:

- **Isn't too descriptive** – it includes just enough description so that we can understand the context, but most of it focuses on analysis. Remember, we don't have to know everything about the course you teach on or your students to understand the point you're making!
- **Collates experiences** – so we can see if this is a common issue, or what the differences might have been when you've taught the same class to different groups.
- **Is a balanced account** – some of the reflective writing you're asked to do will be about your experiences on the MAAP. It can be easy sometimes if you've had a frustrating experience to want to get all of this out and blame other people – but we want to see where you might also take ownership of situations where things haven't gone well, or look for solutions to issues (that don't involve you just working with different people next time!).

Other places to look for help with reflective writing

Help with reflective writing at City:

<https://studenthub.city.ac.uk/help-and-support/improve-your-study-skills>

References:

- Borton, T. (1970) *Reach, Touch and Teach*. London: Hutchinson.
- Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development. Available online at <http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/gibbs/index.htm>
- Manouchehri, A. (2001) 'Professional discourse and teacher change', *Action in Teacher Education*, Volume 1, pp. 89-115.
- Manouchehri, A. (2002) 'Developing teaching knowledge through peer discourse', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Volume 18, Issue 6, August, pp. 715-737.

Guides:

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/asc/documents/public/Short-Guide-Reflective-Writing><https://www.port.ac.uk/student-life/help-and-advice/study-skills/written-assignments/reflective-writing-introduction>

<https://www.port.ac.uk/student-life/help-and-advice/study-skills/written-assignments/reflective-writing-introduction>

<https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/reflective/writing>