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The Reflective Essay in Social Research Methods Education: An Analysis of Student Assessment Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Reflective essays have become common in higher education, especially for modules and programmes focused on the development of practical skills. This paper analyses the efficacy of reflective essays specifically for social research methods education and training. In order to do so, a thematic analysis of qualitative survey data from undergraduate students taking a compulsory second-year social research methods module was undertaken. Overall, I contend that while the process of reflecting itself has clear benefits, and students themselves generally perceive the act of reflecting as being personally beneficial, the requirement to write up into an essay for submission has more mixed results. Further, while previous studies have suggested that reflective essays are confidence-building exercises, this research suggests that while this was the case for some students who completed the assignment, others found the process more discouraging. The paper concludes by suggesting several potential improvements that could be made to reflective essays in order to mitigate these issues.

KEYWORDS

Academic reflection; reflective essays; research methods; social science

Introduction

Due to their capacity for encouraging connections between theory and practices, fostering active participation and self-efficacy in personal development, and preparing students to deal with ‘complex, multi-factorial situations’ (Ryan 2011; Ryan and Ryan 2013; Rolfe 2014, 1180), reflective essays offer a potentially powerful resource for social research methods training. However, while such assignments have been explored in some detail within disciplines that have longer histories of reflective practice, such as nursing, medicine and social work, relatively little is known about their value in relation to teaching research methods in higher education social science contexts. Drawing on qualitative survey data from 19 undergraduates, this paper offers insights into student experiences of completing reflective essays as part of their social research methods training. In particular, it considers the potential for reflective essays to positively influence student self-efficacy and confidence in social research methods.

Reflective essays in higher education

Reflective essays have been increasingly utilized across a broad range of disciplines in higher education. Such assignments differ from conventional essays insofar as they ‘require students to make sense of their experiences by building mental models of the process and knowledge that they have acquired and being aware of the knowledge state they have achieved’ (Hosein and Rao 2017, 112). With its roots in Dewey’s (1933) work on the development of a reflective practice,¹ reflective writing aims to draw the learner’s attention to their own conduct and practices, thereby supporting the development of a self-cognisant rather than unconscious action (Cho 2017). As a form of assessment they are considered to be student-focused (Hosein and Rao 2017) and transformative (Ryan 2012), holding the potential to be a space within which students can ‘try to develop their own sense of who they are and what their lives are for’ (Badley 2009, 249). As a result, in place of surface learning (where the learner

¹For an productive discussion on the topic, see Rolfe (2014).

aims to simply memorize ideas and phrases only to divulge them when required) or strategic learning (adopting tactics of internalization in order to pass a module² ‘without the intention to change their practice’), reflection can allow for deeper forms of learning wherein the pedagogical interaction alters the student’s perspective and – hence – practices (Moon 2004).

As much of the literature acknowledges, however, neither reflective exercises nor reflective assignments can achieve these various positive outcomes in a vacuum. Rather, their efficacy is affected by how they are communicated, structured and framed within the module (Moon 2004; Ryan 2012; Ryan and Ryan 2013). Reflection is itself a far from simple or unitary cognitive phenomenon; rather, writers in the field have pointed to the existence of multiple different forms of reflection, ranging from relatively simple descriptive reportage to deeper, more transformative experiences (Hatton and Smith 1995; Grossman 2009; Ryan 2012). Academic reflection is not instinctive or even particularly intuitive; hence, if put in place without effective explanation and support, it can stray from enabling student-led and deep learning toward being a more teacher-led and superficial process (Ryan 2012; Ryan and Ryan 2013).

Similarly, while operationalizing reflection in the form of a written summative assessment can help to communicate to students the importance of developing a reflective practice (Maloney et al. 2013; Hosein and Rao 2017), doing so also holds the potential for students to engage in strategic behavior that can render learning shallower and less transformative. One example of this is inventing the experiences, actions and outcomes that form the basis of the reflection. Maloney et al. (2013, 625) found that, although a majority of their participants were honest for most of their essays (with 68% of their participants stating that 80% or more of their essays were truthful reports), students ‘typically invent a proportion of their critically reflective assignment submissions’. Reasons stated for doing so included aiming to meet assessment expectations/criteria, feelings of embarrassment or other difficulties in discussing emotion, failure to recall an appropriate experience to reflect upon, and simply to fill out the essay to meet the word limit. Nevertheless, many of their participants

perceived their fabrications to speak to true experiences, such as inventing a scenario that better exemplified something the student learned over the period.

When it comes to the use of reflective essays in social research methods education, however, the literature remains notably sparse. An extensive literature search in the area produced only one study addressing the issue. Hosein and Rao (2017) analyzed 16 reflective essays submitted as part of an undergraduate social research methods module. They found that students completing these essays were able to demonstrate critical evaluation of their experiences both of completing field research (including assessing the practical challenges involved in conducting research, their choice of methodology, the value of the data produced, and the ethicality of their approach) and of their development as social researchers. On the latter, they perceived considerable student enthusiasm for their research ideas, evidence of developing confidence in undertaking research, and metacognition about their capabilities in conducting research methods (Hosein and Rao 2017). As a result, the authors conclude that reflective essays offer a highly effective tool of student-led learning for social research methods education.

Hosein and Rao’s study offers a productive first step in the field; however – as Maloney et al. (2013) and others’ work attests – the potential for students to be strategic in what is included in their reflective essays means that there is a need to go beyond simply analyzing the essays submitted. In order to investigate the value of this form of assessment in terms of furthering student confidence, self-efficacy, and awareness of their developing capabilities in social research methods, further empirical work is needed that draws on student perspectives on – and experiences of – academic reflection. This paper aims to contribute in this regard.

Context of the study

This research involved recruiting participants taking the compulsory undergraduate social research methods module based in the Department of Sociology at the University of York. Completed by students on a selection of Bachelors of Arts honors degree programs, for most this was their first engagement with research methods at higher education level. The module used a blended flipped classroom approach (Van der Zwan and Afonso 2019), wherein students engage with short online video ‘lecture’ material *via* the university’s virtual learning environment prior to attending 2-h, in-person interactive workshops. The first term of this module is dedicated to developing both knowledge

²By “module” I mean a component of a degree programme focused on a specific topic that students are required to complete in order to progress to the next stage of the programme. At the time of research, undergraduate students in the Department of Sociology at the University of York were required to complete 4 modules in the second year of their degree programme.

and practical skills in qualitative research methods. Through this term, all students in the module ($n=178$ for 2020–21) are allocated a ‘research team’, containing around five students per team. Research teams are tasked with creating, carrying out, and then presenting two small-scale research projects: the first using interview methods; the second, ethnographic methods. Both group presentations are formative assessments. Having completed these projects, individual students are required to submit a 1,000-word reflective essay (worth 20% of the overall grade for the module), reflecting on their personal experience of conducting both research projects throughout the term. For students taking the module, this was the first reflective essay assignment of their degree programme. It is this reflective assignment that is the subject of consideration in this paper. As well as coordinating the module, I also deliver many of the module’s lectures and workshops.

Methods

In order to assess the efficacy of reflective essays for social research methods education and training, undergraduate students enrolled on the social research methods module described above were invited to complete a short, qualitative survey (see online [Appendix A](#)). As well as offering the potential for rich data on student experiences of completing the assignment (Braun et al. 2021), qualitative surveys have been found to have strong perceived anonymity among its research participants (Terry and Braun 2017). Given my position as module coordinator and core lecturer, it was particularly important for the surveys to not only be anonymous at the point of data collection, but also for students to perceive this to be the case. This is both to ensure the ethicality of the project and to minimize participant bias. All students enrolled in the module at the time were invited to complete the survey. It was made clear to all students that their participation was entirely voluntary, anonymous, and not in any sense a requirement or component of the module. The survey was run through Google Forms, was open for completion by students January–March 2021, and was completed by 19 students in total.

The questions on the survey were a mixture of short, quantitative questions using the Likert scale (included in order to allow students to organize their thoughts prior to completing the qualitative questions) and longer-form qualitative questions. The questions asked were organized into three key substantive areas: (1) the extent to which they found completing the reflective essay beneficial for their personal

development as a social researcher (perceived usefulness); (2) developing student identification as a social researcher (metacognition); (3) student identification of skills, knowledge, and abilities in social research being developed (awareness of skills competency). Once collected, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. To do so, I utilized Braun and Clarke’s suggested six phases for analysis of this kind: familiarization with the data; initial coding of the data; searching for themes in the codes produced in phase 2; reviewing the themes, checking these are internally coherent and sufficiently different from each other; naming and defining each theme; and reporting the findings (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield 2022). The four themes generated through this process are outlined below.

This paper offers insights into students’ own experiences of completing the reflective essay assignment. It is, therefore, limited in scope to the participants’ personal evaluations of their own learning. Although students completing the survey were asked to reflect on how the reflective essay impacted their personal development in research methods, self-awareness as social researchers in training, and potential consolidation of skills, knowledge and abilities in the field, this study is not able to offer findings relating to the actual change in these variables over time. Further research is thus required to assess whether undertaking reflective essays led to observable differences over time in student knowledge, capabilities and self-assurance when conducting social research in practice.

Findings

The thematic analysis yielded four core themes: (1) the process of reflecting on the experience of conducting research was broadly understood to be beneficial; (2) completing the assignment allowed for the consolidation of learning through the module; (3) the effect of writing up the assignment was more mixed, with some finding this helpful and others less so; and (4) the assignment affected student confidence, both positively and negatively.

Reflecting as beneficial

Almost all students who participated in the study, whether broadly supportive or critical of the assignment itself, expressed a belief that the process of reflecting on their experiences of conducting research was a productive exercise. As I outline below, other

aspects of the process of producing the assignment – in particular, the writing of the essay – appears to have more mixed results. However, the benefits of reflection for personal development and growth in research methods were repeatedly expressed. For most, the reflective element of the assignment was conceptualized as separate from other parts of the process, such as writing up. As P14 put it, the main benefit of the reflective essay was ‘the step for preparation of the assignment’ in which they could ‘list mistake[s]’ and consider how they could ‘improve them’. Similarly, P3 wrote, ‘it made me sit down and think about any skills I had developed upon, and any new skills gained through completing the research tasks’. In this sense, the benefits of critical reflection were understood as primarily occurring in the introspection and preparation stage.

Numerous benefits of this reflective process were outlined in the data. Participants listed a range of specific areas of social research methods which they felt were developed further through this process, including data collection, analysis, ethical implications, and general aspects of research practice such as keeping a research diary. The process of reflection was also perceived as a conduit for metacognition. Reflecting on their research experiences ‘highlighted areas that I find more challenging than others – therefore I can focus on specifically developing my skills in these areas to ensure any research I do in the future will benefit’ (P4). Overall, the assessment’s requirement to systematically revisit their research experience and contemplate ‘the choices [they] made and what [they] would have done differently’ (P2) was understood to have had a positive impact on their development in the area.

Consolidating learning

Another positive aspect of the reflective exercise that most participants referenced at some point in their survey response was its usefulness for consolidating learning developed through the module. As P17 put it, ‘I think it was overall helpful for me to go over what I did, instead of just moving on and forgetting about it’. Students reported that the act of reflecting upon their experiences helped with further understanding and accurately using abstract concepts (P4, P11, P14), deepening their understanding of the process of undertaking a research project (P6, P7, P9, P11, P12, P15, P17), developing discernment in issues relating to research ethics (P10, P16), and recalling theories and terminology (P4). Describing the latter, P4 wrote:

I was not familiar with some terms that are specific to the module such as thematic analysis before I started the module; the completion of the assignment helped to consolidate my knowledge of these terms and enabled me to reflect on if I effectively used them in my research.

For several participants, the consolidation of lessons learnt was described as being particularly helpful for their development toward undertaking research again in the future. These results chime with scholarship in the area, which has linked the act of reflecting to the deepening and reinforcing of what has been learnt, the recognition of knowledge gaps, the production of personal understandings and conceptualisations of ideas and concepts, and the development of higher level cognitive abilities (Vygotsky 1997; Chang 2019). In this way, this second theme connects to and reinforces the previous one, reiterating the point that participants generally recognized the process of reflecting as both constructive and rewarding.

Reflective writing

While reflecting was generally considered helpful, the requirement to write these reflections into essay form as a summative assessment was perceived as being more mixed in its effects. For some, this was understood to have actually detracted from the benefits gained through the assignment’s reflective dimension:

- P2: I feel like I did develop as a researcher [through the module,] but I wasn’t able to convey that through the reflective essay.
- P18: the essay ... felt overwhelming and took away from exploring my ability to research.
- P10: Writing down observations in academic language was more confusing than beneficial. ... the essay very much felt like an assignment that was not a display of skill and more like the department needed to grade something.

P10 was not alone in suggesting that they struggled to find the right tone in writing the essay; several other respondents described the challenge of balancing academic style with the personal language of introspection. P10 also expressed a feeling that the assignment had been chosen simply to allow for the production of an easily gradable assignment. Although not an accurate depiction of departmental assessment decision-making, this points to the issue at the heart of this theme: the discrepancy between the pedagogical aim of the assignment (to create space for critical

reflection on individual experiences of conducting research) and student experience of producing the reflective essay. As P3 put it, it was, in practice, their 'writing skills' that were 'at the end of the day ... what [they] were being marked on, not [their] ability to gain research skills'. A further element the writing the assignment that several students cited as challenging was its word limit. Three participants suggested that 1,000 words were too restrictive, and felt unable to express what they had learned sufficiently. Overall, the majority of participants suggested in one way or another that writing the essay posed a challenge, many of whom described it as being more challenging to complete than any other assignment completed thus far in their degree.

One key aspect of reflective writing that students reported as particularly challenging was the need to draw on academic literature. Several participants described struggling to understand the relevance of this literature for describing their personal experiences of conducting research. In a particularly candid account, P16 described how they failed to find any work that provided any 'insight' on their experiences, only choosing to include these 'to gain marks'. However, using the literature was not viewed negatively across the board. Others reported that engaging with the research methods literature was an invaluable element of the assignment. P9 and P12 described how comparing their experiences with those of social scientists who utilize similar methods helped them to develop their understanding and approach. Likewise, P11 experienced the encouragement to engage with the literature as productive for their development as a social researcher: 'I had to seriously think about what I had learnt as well as research appropriate literature which allowed me to further develop my understandings of the research methods'.

Although most respondents reported negative experiences of writing the reflective essay, this was not homogenous across the board. Two respondents described benefits associated with the assignment. One participant (P12) suggested that having a written document in some form was a useful record to be able to re-read in future. As they put it, having a list of areas to improve upon 'logged in some readable format to revisit as and when the next project arises – a summary of your strengths and your weaknesses' is helpful. Second, as P14 explained, the need to write out and clearly explain what they had reflected upon aided in their ability to describe, and hence consolidate and further develop, their learning.

Confidence

Hosein and Rao's (2017) analysis of reflective essays found evidence that such assignments had a positive impact on student confidence in research methods. For some of the participants in the study, the essay did indeed aid in building self-belief and self-efficacy. P6 described how the process of searching for areas of their practice to reflect upon allowed them to 'realise things that [they] had to overcome [*sic*]' through their research projects, and hence encouraged a sense of personal achievement and growth. P11 described how the process of writing about themselves 'in the context of being a social researcher for the first time' allowed them to 'feel more like a social researcher'. Similarly, for P9, writing the essay made them 'more confident in defining areas of social research' that they have a personal interest in engaging with in future. Given that students are often apprehensive about undertaking social research methods modules, the potential for reflective essays to positively impact student confidence and efficacy is promising.

However, not all participants reported that completing the essay was quite so affirmational an experience. For some, having to write in an unfamiliar register, feeling unsure of how to express their experiences, and, especially, receiving a grade they were disappointed with resulted in feelings of discouragement and even self-doubt in their ability to do social research. As P2 explained:

I enjoyed conducting the research and doing the presentations and felt more confident after doing these, however writing the essay was hard for me and I didn't get a very good grade despite feeling as though I'd done reasonably well during the term which made me feel pretty demotivated after that.

Hence, the effects of the reflective essays on student confidence were found to be more ambivalent than unambiguously positive.

Bolstering this finding further, when coding the data I noted the frequency with which students framed their reflections in primarily negative terms. While some participants described the primary activity involved in undertaking the assignment as one of identifying *both* weaknesses and strengths (P11: 'what research practices we used worked best to produce the best results and what areas didn't work as well in order to do better next time'), many perceived it as simply about identifying weaknesses (P16: 'reflecting on what went wrong, as this helps me know what not to do next time'). Importantly, not all students who used this phrasing perceived this to be personally detrimental. For example, P4 described how having

the chance to examine their weaknesses was ‘insightful’, giving them the ‘the tools and ability to improve in these areas’ and hence facilitate their ‘development as a researcher’. Nevertheless, this tendency affords the reflective essay the potential to be demoralizing in practice.

Conclusion

Overall, this study found the reflective essay to be a broadly beneficial tool for social research methods teaching and learning. Formally introducing an element of reflection was found to be productive, creating the space for students to develop a critical awareness of their own research methods practices, abilities and knowledge, to consolidate prior learning, and to cultivate metacognition of their progress as social researchers. However, the effects of reflective writing on both student confidence and deep learning were found to be more mixed. Where reflecting on the research undertaken was considered to be positive across the board, many participants described these benefits as being diminished by the need to write these reflections into academic essay format.

To improve the impact of reflective essays for research methods teaching and learning, tailored scaffolding – beyond simple explanation and advice – needs to be built into research methods modules in order to cultivate student reflective practices (Ryan and Ryan, 2013). This should not only involve the development of reflective writing, but also connect with the broader aim of encouraging students to view reflection as intrinsic to the process of social research itself. This study also suggests that conveners of research methods modules should give careful consideration to the format of the reflective assignment itself: how it is structured, whether it is most effective as a formative or summative assessment, and the extent to which reflection is best served in written academic form or alternative methods of reflective expression. On the latter, Ryan (2012, 210, 211) describes the productive potential of approaches that go beyond the ‘symbols of language’, including through the use of art in ‘still or moving visual forms’, ‘embodied performances in dance, movement or dramatic form’, and ‘music, sound, lighting and props’. Such approaches may allow the benefits of reflection to be maintained while circumventing the negative experiences that come with requiring the expression of these reflections in written essay form. While further research would be needed to trace the effectiveness of alternative forms of reflective assessment, it is clear from this research that reflexive assignments hold considerable potential for

furthering self-efficacy, confidence and the consolidation of knowledge in relation to higher education social research methods training. Notes

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