

From Insight to Impact: Reflexivity and Reflection in Educational Research

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ABSTRACT

In this article I explore reflexive and reflective practices in education and research emphasising their distinctions and benefits for professional learning, examining their role in shaping positionality, and discussing various methods for capturing these approaches. To further illustrate these ideas, a self-reflective academic researcher account is provided, offering a multi-dimensional exploration that enhances clarity and depth to these processes. This self-reflective account demonstrates how personal values, experiences, perspectives, and biases can influence our professional practice. It also demonstrates how engaging in these processes can add rigour and transparency to research and the writing up process. By providing a structured overview, practical tools, and an applied example, this article aims to support researchers and practitioners in effectively integrating reflexive and reflective practices. It encourages a deeper understanding of how these approaches contribute to meaningful professional growth and ethical, informed decision-making.

Keywords: qualitative research, collaborative research, reflective practice, reflexivity, positionality, self-reflection, practitioner research

Introduction

Reflective and reflexive practices are widely recognised as a key component of social science disciplines (Edge, 2021), with education often considered one of the

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most significant fields for its application (UK Research and Innovation UKRI, 2023). Reflection can be loosely defined as the process of analysing past experiences to learn and improve. Reflexivity goes further by recognising how our personal biases and perspectives shape this understanding and influence outcomes. Many practitioners engage in these approaches to evaluate the successes and challenges of their daily teaching, using these insights to inform, frame and enhance future delivery and professional learning (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018).

For education researchers, these practices become even more paramount. In research, they are essential for understanding a researcher's subjectivity and how this influences their work (Finlay, 1998; Jamieson, 2023; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Despite the significance of these approaches, within the literature reflexivity and reflectivity are often viewed as complex and confusing concepts, with terms frequently used interchangeably, making them difficult to conceptualise or apply in practice (Probst, 2015; Watts, 2018).

This paper provides a brief overview of the related literature, exploring concepts and significance, along with examples of theoretical models, frameworks, and tools to aid practice. The paper is written from a personal voice to aid impact and relatability, and to situate myself within the work (Brennan, 2024). The discussion centres around my experiences of the creation, application, and reflection of using a personalised model of reflection developed to support my professional practice and improve the quality of my research. The discussion is positioned through a narrative account of a collaborative research analysis session, illustrating both reflexive and reflective processes. The paper concludes by highlighting key takeaways and thought prompts for researchers and practitioners, emphasising how regular reflexive and reflective application can enhance research transparency, improve rigour, and enrich our daily practice.

Literature Review

Defining reflexivity and reflection

In my exploration of reflexivity and reflection, I found these concepts to be widely regarded as essential interconnected practises that enable researchers to produce ethical, transparent and good quality research (Valandra, 2012; Probst, 2015; Bolton

and Delderfield, 2018; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). While applicable across both qualitative and quantitative paradigms, these practices are more commonly embedded in qualitative methodologies. However, Olaghue (2022) suggests utilising these approaches can further strengthen the integration of both methodologies in mixed methods research and the quality of resulting outcomes.

I have noted that the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ are occasionally used interchangeably and can sometimes lack clarity in their definition and application. To scaffold thinking, these and other concepts can be supported by theoretical frameworks, models, and other reflective tools (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009).

I understand reflexivity to be a conscious and active practice (Bassot, 2023) that enhances self-awareness, and prompts critical examination of how personal beliefs, experiences, positionality, and values shape our interpretations (Edge, 2021). Reflexivity can be transformative, as it fosters deeper, real-time engagement with thought processes (Mortari, 2015). At the same time, I acknowledge Probst’s (2015) caution regarding the uncritical use of the term, noting a lack of empirical evidence surrounding reflexive processes and the risk of excessive reflexivity ‘in the moment,’ which may divert attention away from the research participant.

In my experience, reflection is typically a more structured, retrospective process, aimed at learning from past experiences to inform and improve future practice (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018). For some researchers, the reflective cycle is framed in relation to past, present, and future experiences (Berger, 2015; Bassot, 2023), or as reflection in and on action (Schön, 1991). I have found engaging effectively in reflection requires dedicated time, effort, and practice, often supported by models or frameworks (Bassot, 2023). As Reay (2007) suggests, reflection should focus on developing a deeper understanding and acceptance of our thoughts, emphasising self-honesty and consideration of our stance as researchers and practitioners; an approach leading naturally back into reflexive thinking.

The double-edged nature of reflexivity and reflection

I have found the perceived benefits of using reflexivity and reflection in research practice are well established in the literature (Schon, 1983; Gibbs, 1988; Finlay, 2002; Etherington, 2004; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2022). While a range of processes, concepts, and definitions are available, I am increasingly aware that it is often the

engagement with the approaches themselves, rather than the interpretation of these practices that holds the greatest significance (Bolton, 2018). This engagement can support a researcher to create an inclusive and detailed account of procedures and decisions undertaken during a research project, adding strength and credibility (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Reay, 2007; Berger, 2015).

Whilst I agree with Edge (2021) that complete neutrality or impartiality in research is considered unobtainable, I have found that regular reflexive and reflective practice enables me to acknowledge my positionality, experiences and subjectivity. By actively documenting these processes, I can also better integrate them into my work. As Seggern, Holst and Brodowski (2023) suggest, further benefits can be seen by embedding these practices into collaborative groups and research teams. In my experience, with careful planning, and time to foster trust and rapport, reflexive discussions whether between researcher and supervisor, among peers, or within larger research groups, can enrich understanding and challenge prior assumptions (Westling et al., 2014; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I also align with Edge's (2021) assertion that to strengthen our professional practices, improve rigour, and enhance self-awareness, reflexive and reflective practices need to be undertaken regularly as part of a planned research programme or professional development plan.

Although I recognise the benefits of reflexive and reflective practice, I also acknowledge there are challenges and assumptions. Some academics suggest practising reflexivity can lead to self-indulgence (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), whilst others might find the concept difficult to grasp or navigate due to ambiguity or lack of professional support (Engward and Davis, 2015). Imposter syndrome and self-doubt are challenges I have personally experienced, and as Seggern et al. (2023) suggest, engaging in self-analysis could further prompt researchers to question the validity and credibility of their own reflections. Additionally, fear of judgment or accountability, especially if undertaken in a group or peer context can act as barriers, discouraging full engagement with the process. I have also found that embedding this concept into individual and team practice requires allocating time, willingness, and effort (Edge, 2021), with time often being reported as a commodity hard to protect with research, teaching, and administrative responsibilities.

As Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) point out, without these foundational elements, reflexive and reflective discussions may lack depth or fail to produce meaningful insights. I believe by appreciating the importance of reflexive and reflective

practices, along with the perceived benefits and barriers, we can better support ourselves and others to engage more authentically and add transparency and rigour to our work.

Models and tools for reflexive and reflective practice

There are many aids available to support becoming a more reflexive and reflective researcher or practitioner. These can consist of frameworks, models, journaling, diaries, note taking, dialogic conversation, and formal writing tasks. I have found that note taking in the moment, diaries, journaling, and dialogic conversation are useful for self-reflexive practices (Corlett, 2012; Horder et al., 2024), whilst frameworks, formal writing tasks, and models aid with self-reflection after an event (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018; Bassot, 2023).

There are a wide range of documented theoretical models for reflection, each with a different approach and various stages. I have found exploring these models to be particularly helpful in structured reflective practice, as they help to recount experiences and provide a clear step by step framework. For example, Gibbs's (1988) reflective model provides six components; description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Kolb (1984) describes a four-stage reflective model focusing on exploring, reflecting, and analysing an experience and then putting those learnings into practice. Jasper (2013) follows a more simplified three-stage experience, reflection and action (ERA) model which involves thinking through an experience and deciding on a course of action. Rolfe et al. (2001) also utilise a three-stage model to initiate this process, presenting three questions comprising of 'what, so what and now what' and can work well for a specific event. In contrast, Schon's (1991) reflection model takes a different approach, and provides structure for both reflexive and reflective practice by exploring reflection in action and reflection on action.

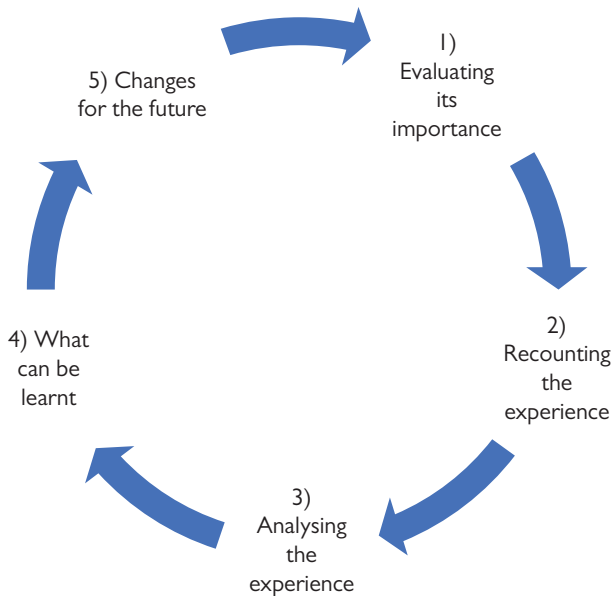
Having an awareness of these various models, and other frameworks and tools available, can help enhance practice by providing a structure to synthesise experiences, make sense of thoughts, and capture these in writing. However, while these models provide guidance, they can come with limitations. With the use of any model or framework, I have found there is a risk that reflections may be confined to fit within a predefined framework rather than allowing thoughts to develop organically. To address this, researchers and practitioners can create their own

personal model (Cottrell, 2015), incorporating key elements from existing frameworks. I feel this approach can be beneficial as it allows for future refinements, and ensures reflection remains an open, meaningful, and evolving process.

Seeing through my own lens: Creating and applying a personal reflective model.

As an active researcher, reflexivity and reflective practices are integral to my work. To aid my reflexive process, I enjoy dialogic conversation with peers and often jot down notes in the moment. This is further aided, for example, by journaling straight after an interview. To aid my reflective practice I have created my own adapted model of reflection (Formby, 2022) generated from exploring other models and reading relevant literature. I combine or use these methods interchangeably and find they provide me with a much-needed structure, adding clarity and authenticity to my work.

Figure 1. Personal adapted model of reflection (Formby, 2022)



My personal model of reflection comprises of five stages relating to either a specific event or experience connected to my work (Figure 1). Evaluating the importance of an event or experience is the first stage of the model, allowing me to assess the relevance of my thoughts and prior knowledge in my work. These may be from data collection activities, a meeting, a bid writing process, or dialogic conversation with others. For example, reflecting on insights generated from rereading diary notes can help highlight positionality within data analysis (Etherington, 2024). To recount an experience, I make further notes and set aside designated time to reflect, with mind maps and charts often serving as useful prompts. This process paves the way for deeper analysis, exploring how my beliefs, past experiences, or emotional reactions may be influencing my relationship with the research and interpretation of data. Jamie and Rathbone (2022) further imply that some people will find Integrating theoretical perspectives into this stage beneficial.

By engaging in this process, it provides me with an opportunity to illustrate any lessons I can learn, the capacity to acknowledge both my professional and personal learning opportunities and strengths, along with any needs. For instance, in the past I have identified an increased need for training to enhance an element of my research role or acknowledged how my prior work roles and empathetic nature supports me in establishing good rapport with participants. In addition, the process helps ascertain any changes I can make in my future work, such as finding time to engage in more peer discussion and ensuring I utilise and build on my skills. Each reflective cycle supports further reflexivity in the moment, which spirals to further reflection, and I have never regretted undertaking the activity. In agreement with Ramani (2018) and Braud *et al.* (2024), it has also strengthened how I formally write up research by adding strength to my reflexive statement and transparency to the research process.

Insights from a Collaborative Research Analysis Workshop: A Personal Account

To provide practical insight and add authenticity and relatability to these practices, I have written a short personal account of my participation in a collaborative research analysis workshop. The workshop brought together a team of academics

from across Wales and provided an invaluable opportunity for in-depth discussions without the disruptions often noted in online meetings. Each academic brought a diverse wealth of educational and research expertise. The analysis workshop was designed to facilitate transcript familiarisation, discussions, and the initial identification of codes. Urry et al. (2024) suggest this type of collaborative reflection can facilitate credible research, especially if embedded at the start of the research design process.

Throughout the workshop discussions, I engaged reflexively by examining how my own assumptions were shaping my thoughts during the transcript familiarisation process. As I engaged in additional internal and external dialogue, I became even more aware of how my values, professional background, and gaps in specialist knowledge may have influenced my initial thoughts and subsequent note taking. It became evident during group feedback that I was not the only one to also consider their own positionality. Our individual perspectives and belief systems led to thought-provoking discussions, where each academic acknowledged their subjectivity, leading to conversations on personal and collective assumptions. These conversations were enabled due to a safe and supportive environment without judgement, an element Marshall et al. (2022) imply encourages open and honest dialogue. Although this reflexive process, which naturally came about during discussion, added some messiness and complexity to the session, it also added richness and transparency to the analytical process.

After the workshop, I drew on my personal model for reflection to aid structure and recounted the experience of how both my own and the group's contributions shaped the initial codes and meaning derived from the data. Analysing the experience, I became aware of the importance of acknowledging my subjectivity from a personal values perspective. This process reinforced that my views will always evolve, shaped by my ongoing experiences and expanding knowledge. The workshop further evidenced that this process is an inherent part of data analysis and strengthened my belief in the importance of practicing reflexivity throughout all elements of a study, from proposal to the writing process. Moreover, it deepened my appreciation for reflexivity statements in writing research, supporting Jamieson et al.'s (2023) rationale of the value in supporting transparent, rigorous and trustworthy research.

Conclusion

Reflexivity and reflection are integral to educational research and practice, enhancing self-awareness, transparency, and rigour. While these terms are often used interchangeably, I see reflexivity as fostering critical engagement in the moment, whereas reflection provides a structured approach to later learning from experience. In this article written from my own perspective, I have introduced these practices, explored theoretical models and practical tools, and provided a personal account of a collaborative research workshop. By embedding regular reflexive and reflective practice in our work, we remain conscious of our positionality, which I have found strengthens professional practice, research integrity, and personal growth. Furthermore, it is essential we recognise the journey we continue to take throughout our lives and acknowledge how our beliefs, perspectives, biases, and assumptions shape and influence our practice.

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