

# **1. Project Title: Can reflective writing inform teaching and learning? An example of health and wellbeing in teaching**

## **2. Activities**

This study took place in the context of a Certificate on Behaviour, Health and Happiness, which was offered for the first time in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick during 2013-14. This Certificate was comprised of a 2-hour session for 25 weeks.

Dr. Katerina Kassavou with expertise on health psychology took the lead in designing this Certificate while Dr. Charoula Tzanakou contributed towards specific sessions drawing sociological perspectives and coaching. Thus, this Certificate incorporated perspectives from health sociology, health psychology, behavioural therapy and coaching, reflecting thus its interdisciplinary character.

The content was shaped on the basis of Level 4 but there were opportunities (additional reading and exercises) for those who were interested in advanced learning. We incorporated a variety of teaching methods such as oral and written presentations, participation observation, feedback, self-observation, role-playing, group discussions and reflective writing activities. In addition, we offered a few practical sessions with activities such as relaxation and stress management exercises.

### **2.1. The student population**

Twelve students registered for this course but four people dropped out during the course due to personal reasons (i.e. two reported hospitalisation, one moved area and one was not interested). It should be noted that 7 out of 8 students participated in this study (please see table 1 for more information, we have used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality).

**Table 1 Students who participated in this study**

	Gender	Age	Education	Cultural background	Essay topic
Matt	Male	55+	UG	British	Sleep, diet
Mary	Female	25-35	PG	Non-British	Social support
Kate	Female	45-55	PG	British	Physical activity, stress
Pam	Female	55+	Secondary	British	Anxiety
Sally	Female	35-45	UG	Non-British	Social support and depression
Jenny	Female	25-35	UG	British	Smoking, meditation
Rachel	Female	35-45	UG	British	Body image

Students had different educational, professional socio-economic and ethnic background. In order to meet the needs of such a diverse student audience with potentially different learning styles, we designed the curriculum in a way that would accommodate this diversity, taking into consideration students' previous knowledge, understanding, cognitive or any other specific needs they may have had. It was identified from the very beginning that the majority of the students in this Certificate were interested in not only understanding what affects health and well-being but also how they could apply existing theories and research evidence in their every day life to improve their well-being.

## **2.2. Reflective writing**

Being novice teachers ourselves with experience in delivering seminars and tutorials to university students, we wanted to develop a course that will have a positive impact on our students' lives, if possible. A course that would inform students about latest research on behaviour, health and happiness but also

enable them to critically review research findings through their personal experience and increasing knowledge on these issues. In addition, we provided tools to identify how this evidence could facilitate them to self-monitor their own behaviour and develop action plans that would potentially result in enhancing their wellbeing.

Therefore, it was decided that reflective writing would be the main teaching and learning tool that would enable us meet the following objectives:

- Develop our teaching practice and enhance our knowledge and skills on how to integrate and use reflection in a pedagogical context
- Investigate to what extent and under which conditions reflection was a useful tool for linking theory and practice in the context of health and well-being. This was assessed by the extent to which reflection facilitated students' learning about health and applying knowledge in their everyday life.

### 2.3. Reflection

There are many definitions of reflection (Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983; 1987; Kolb, 1984) but we concluded that the definition that satisfied most the aims of this project was the following based on Moon (1999):

*“Reflection is a form of mental processing-like a form of thinking- that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess”.*

In the specific context of behaviour and health, which is a rather complex and personalised concept, reflection was an appropriate tool to enable students to process and review current knowledge but also personal experiences with the aim to identify barriers and enablers to enhance their well-being (which was the ultimate purpose of this course).

Reflection has been used increasingly for teaching and learning in HE and has found to be beneficial in terms of skills development such as self-development (Watson, 2008); critical thinking (Moon, 2005), awareness of mental functions and support in decision making and empowerment (Sen, 2010). In addition, it has been utilized in various subject contexts such as business (Anderson and Thorpe, 2007; Currie and Knights, 2003) or professional courses such as teaching or nursing (Bulman et al, 2013; Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012). In medical education reflection is among the highly recommended tools for raising awareness and developing actions for health and well-being (Koh et al., 2014). However, there is no information – to our knowledge – whether reflection would enhance understanding about health and well-being in non medical contexts with a heterogeneous group of students.

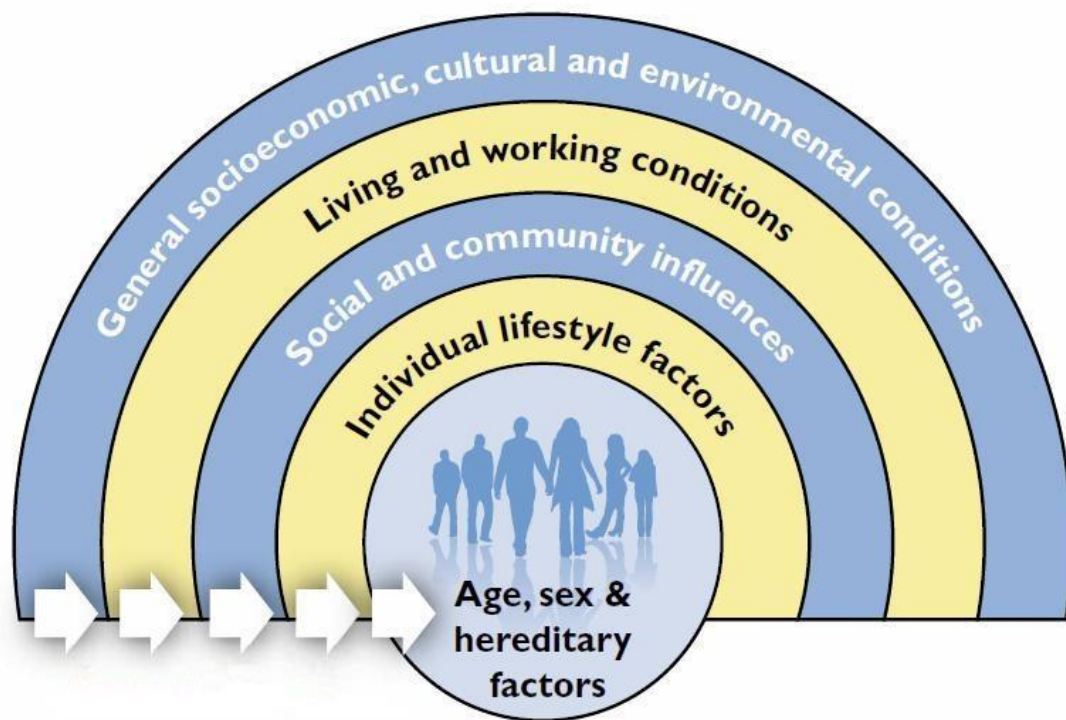
To bridge this gap, the following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent reflective writing is a useful tool for teaching and learning

- a) For a diverse group of students,
  - b) Within the context of health and well-being
2. What are the conditions that enable effectiveness of this tool?
  3. What are the challenges and facilitators of reflective practice in this teaching and learning context?

It was decided early on to introduce a theoretical framework that would provide a specific context for the learners to write reflections and enable the teachers to assess these reflections. The Rainbow model by Dahlgren and Whitehead was thus adopted which is a useful framework that enables individuals to identify health determinants and understand the how different factors associate with each other (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1 Rainbow Model by Dahlgren and Whitehead (1991)



*Health Determinants Model*

#### 2.4. How did we use reflective writing?

Reflective writing was integrated throughout the curriculum as part of both the weekly sessions and the assessment forms of this certificate. More specifically, each student wrote a semi-structured reflection exercise about his/her experience with the topic presented, at the end of each weekly session (see figure 2 for examples of reflection exercises).

Figure 2 Examples of reflection exercises

- Take a few minutes to reflect on all of the things that you think impact on and influence your health. Write them down- Do you see any pattern in those things? Can you group them?
- How much of your own health is influenced by your living and working conditions?
- Look at the body image you draw earlier- how this is related to your dietary behaviour - describe how your body image affects your everyday life and well being
- Is smoking more than a physiological addiction? Elaborate using examples of your everyday life - What is the best intervention for smoking cessation and why? What are the key components?
- How does social support affect your health and wellbeing?
- Choose one example and describe what and how your personality traits are associated with your health and wellbeing.
- Select a personal medical issue and explain it from a psychological and sociological perspective vs medical perspective?
- Write your thoughts, feelings and behaviours on your sleeping patterns- what helps/ what does not help

At the end of each term 1 and 2, students were asked to write an essay, which included a reflection section. At the end of the curriculum, each student wrote a semi-structured reflection portfolio on one to three topics covered during the weekly sessions, attaching the weekly reflection exercises as appendices. Students were asked to use the health determinant model as a framework to their reflections.

Table 2 Guidelines for reflection portfolio

### **Reflection portfolio -What should I do?**

#### **1) Describe (30% of your mark)**

- **Events: What did you reflect on?**
- **Thoughts: what were the thoughts associated with the events?**
- **Feelings: What were your reactions and feelings?**

**Provide a summary of the topics – focus on your personal experience**

#### **2) Criticise/ reflect (70% of your mark)**

- **What was good and bad about the experience/ reflection exercise? Make value judgements.**
- **What patterns you identified and/or ways of working**
- **What sense can you make of the description? What was really going on?**
- **What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these reflection exercises and the analyses you have undertaken?**
- **What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time?**
- **What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?**

### **2.5. How did we analyse reflective writing?**

The tutors assessed the portfolios and provided constructive feedback to the students. The analysis drew upon thematic analysis method and auto-ethnographic methodology and included two levels of analysis:

- a) students analysed the material of the module based on their experiences and the theoretical knowledge they acquired. In this way we assessed students' learning, understanding and critical skills.
- b) we analysed the impact of the module both on individuals and on the group. In this way we assessed whether students applied some of the skills in their everyday life (e.g. coping skills). Most importantly we evaluated whether and how reflection facilitated people's behaviours towards wellbeing and happiness.

It should be noted that in terms of ethical issues, we have discussed with experts in using reflective writing in teaching about the advantages and disadvantages related with the timing of asking informed consent from the students. We

decided to ask for informed consent at the end of the Certificate in order to avoid distortion in their reflective accounts by knowing in advance that they will be employed in a research process. Students were able to deny their participation in this project. While this process entailed risks for participation, we were confident that by then we would have built substantial rapport which would maximise participation in this project. Their openness and sharing of personal experiences since week 1 in the whole group has enhanced this confidence. This was also apparent by their willingness to take topics for assignments related to their reflective writing and present them to the group for further discussion. In the end, seven out of eight students gave consent with only one student withdrawing.

### 3. Outcomes

The primary objective of this project was to investigate whether reflective writing is an effective tool for teaching and learning. This project has not only enriched our teaching practice especially in relation to the role of reflection but also has benefited the learning experience of our students regarding health and well-being.

This project enabled us to assess the content and material selected for this Certificate as the appropriate stimuli to raise awareness on health and well being issues, and further informed our future practice in developing curricula. In addition, it offered an insight into the usefulness of teaching methods such as reflective writing, gaining a better understanding of this method including its challenges, facilitators and the conditions under which is successful in bridging the gap between teaching and learning.

An equally important aim of this project was to augment the learning experience of our students beyond providing information and raising awareness but enabling them to reflect and make informed decisions about their lifestyle and well-being. As a result of this project and as shown below students were able to develop skills that enabled them a) to identify factors that influenced their health and well-being and b) to use these skills in enhancing their wellbeing and happiness as demonstrated below. Through the Certificate, students in each session were able to explore and get a better understanding of the factors that affected their health and then use reflection - during and after class - to make associations between what was presented in the class, how it was related to their everyday life and what they could do for improving their quality of life. Our students were very enthusiastic and were engaged with the teaching and learning process providing us with continuous feedback about balancing delivery of information with time for reflection and class activities. They underlined -from the very beginning - the importance of being able to contribute and relate their experiences to the theories and research evidence we presented.

In essence, this was a teaching and research project simultaneously, informing each other at all stages of this Certificate. Students were enthusiastically participating and contributing in the teaching and learning environment feeding at the same time the research process. On the other hand, researching and thinking critically about 1) the material presented in the sessions and how was that related to the participants' experience and 2) the use of reflective writing in a general learning environment and a health and well being learning environment immensely enriched our teaching practice.

### **3.1 Learning outcomes for students – skills' development**

This certificate was student-centred, developed and reviewed continuously on the basis of our student needs and preferences. The tutors had decided early to integrate practical sessions that will target developing or enhancing skills that would be of great importance for an improved healthy lifestyle.

Through the thematic analysis of the student portfolios, students reported developing a range of skills spanning from self-awareness to interpersonal, communication, time and stress management skills as illustrated below:

#### **Self-awareness**

*'becoming aware of the benefits of losing weight, become more active, and building my strength encouraged positivity and drive' [Rachel]*

#### **Assertiveness and communication skills**

*With small steps I am trying to be a little more assertive in areas that are important to me, to communicate more effectively, especially with my family' [Pam]*

#### **Awareness of the complexity of factors**

(influencing health and well-being in everyday life – thoughtful approach towards interpreting everyday life)

*'in linking the physical, mental and emotional aspects to see how they interact with each other and to be aware of how each impacts on the other and hopefully improve my behaviour, health and happiness' [Pam]*

### **3.2 Improving teaching practice – enhancing understanding of how to use reflection, which conditions affected teaching and student learning in the context of behaviour and health**

Based on the student portfolios and our personal reflections as tutors, we identified that there was heterogeneity in the way our students understood, valued and interpreted knowledge. Different background characteristics might have impacted to this heterogeneity. For example, we identified that students were responding differently in relation to the factors that affected health in general but also their own health, They were also choosing different topics to



work on for their assignments and were concentrating on different aspects to improve their own wellbeing. Below, we report some factors that were identified to be influential on students' learning processes.

### 3.2.1 Personal and cultural differences

We had a diverse group in terms of age, gender, nationality and past experience with health related knowledge. As shown in the abovementioned table, students' age spanned from over 25 years old to a couple of students being more than 55 years old. We had three men originally but two dropped out for personal reasons and two women were from a non-British background.

Based on these characteristics, personal (age, gender,) and cultural (nationality differences were demonstrated in the following ways in the context of this Certificate:

- Affected choice of factors from theoretical framework to understand health and well-being
- Socially oriented vs individually oriented
- Interpretation of explaining behaviour to different sets of factors
- How much value attributed to factors affected
- Choice of essay topics

For example, Mary coming from a country with collectivist character was more likely to concentrate to social support networks as an important factor to enhance feelings of happiness:

*'When I am confronted with stressful life events as a sojourner, the host country nationals' support has a positive impact in terms of informational, instrumental and emotional support. I firmly believe that good social relationships produce happiness and well-being' [Mary]*

### 3.2.2 Educational differences

Considering that our students were comprised of individuals with a great range of educational attainment levels from school-leavers (in the 1960s), to college and university students to PhD graduates, there were different levels of understanding and critical analysis to topics presented and discussed.

In summary, educational differences were observed in the following:

- How they used and understood the theoretical framework (superficial vs deeper level of understanding, different levels of critical analysis and engagement with the framework)
- Lack of understanding of how abstract knowledge could be translated into everyday practice
- Confidence to conduct further research to identify and critically evaluate research evidence

For example, Kate due to her scientific background was more reluctant to use reflection as a tool for learning due to the high degree of subjectivity that it entailed.

*At the beginning of the course, I felt that reflection was very subjective and questioned how this could be of value. With my scientific background, I tend to look at academic evidence and facts to learn, and reflection was a new learning tool to me [...] The value of reflection has probably been the most important learning outcome for me from the course [Kate]*

### **3.3 Conditions/ facilitators of reflection**

Reflecting back on our teaching practice and the use of reflection as learning and teaching tool, we came across many challenges but we have also identified conditions that facilitated the success of this tool.

This Certificate was delivered by two different tutors from different disciplinary perspectives, which actually enriched the certificate since they brought different viewpoints on health. However, as highlighted by an external observer in the class, the tutors had high congruence ensuring a nice flow within the courses. At the same time, both tutors came from a different cultural background (non-British) and they were thus more likely to challenge norms in the British culture and provide different national viewpoints. At the same time, they were open and were self-exposing to the group providing personal experiences in relation to health and well-being encouraging students to follow their example.

The students were a small group, which enabled the tutors to build rapport continuously throughout the 25 weeks as evidenced by the sharing of very personal experiences with the group in the last term. The heterogeneous nature of the group as mentioned already was also important in raising different viewpoints and perspectives since individuals were at different life stages and had developed differently. In addition, all the students had a great interest in health and well-being since this was not an obligatory certificate but one that individuals voluntarily enrolled and paid to attend in their free time.

Last but not least, the flexibility in the structure of the curriculum and the integration of student preferences in relation to topics covered was of great importance because students felt valued and consulted in their learning. For example, in the first term the Certificate was teacher-driven but it was slowly becoming student driven.

### 3.4 Challenges of reflection

From the very beginning, the use of reflection was very challenging. Most of the students had not used reflection in their learning experience, having been educated in traditional learning formats. They were very reluctant to use reflection for three reasons: a) they could not understand what reflection is and how it is assessed b) what is the value of reflection and c) due to the nature of health and well being as a topic, participants were asked to reflect on very personal and sensitive topics.

To overcome this challenge, continuous support was provided in relation to what is reflection, how to write reflections and how to use reflection. This enabled them to understand and actually improved their reflective writing by the end of the certificate.

The heterogeneous student group was both an advantage and a challenge. The differences in age, nationality, education along with the fact that it was not possible to pre-screen the students in a lifelong learning context (different motivations), the Certificate could not take these factors into the account at the initial development stage, which took place before registration. However, allowing for flexibility and review of the certificate as the classes progressed, enabled the tutors to take these parameters into account and convert this challenge into an advantage.

### 3.5 Conclusions

To sum up, based on the portfolios of the students and the personal student feedback it was concluded that the reflection as a learning tool for this certificate was quite effective in meeting the purposes of this Certificate which was to a)raise awareness of participants about the complexity of factors that affected health and well being and b) to use reflection to understand which factors affected personal wellbeing and health and c)to use skills developed or enhanced through the course to improve their health and well-being.

*Although the purpose of doing the reflections on each topic was not clear to me initially, I have found these to be a valuable exercise. Reflection helped me to put the topic into a personal context and reflect on how it relate to my own experience. It also helped to make sense of complex understandings*  
[Kate]

*Overall, the above reflections have helped me realise how much my life has improved in recent years including but not confined to these areas and that my efforts should continue to be directed to pursuing all the rules for a healthy lifestyle.. With a positive rather than problem-oriented mindset*  
[Matt]

## 4. Implications

Based on this project, we concluded that reflection in the context of behaviour, health and happiness can be a useful tool:

- For both teachers and learners to bridge the gap between practice and theory
- Enhance learners' understanding of factors affecting their own health and well-being and enable them to potentially take action

However, careful consideration needs to be given on the following issues in relation to this specific context:

Firstly, tutors need to set up clear expectations on the content and the assessment process of the course. During the course, tutors need to explain the links between theory and practice using participants' everyday experiences. This would enable students to apply theoretical ideas to everyday life and take action. Providing tips in each course was found to be a useful strategy towards this objective.

Secondly, using a specific theoretical framework to provide a structure is extremely helpful in: a) enhancing learners' understanding of reflection and b) enabling tutors' assessment of reflection. Tutors need to allocate considerable time and put emphasis on students' understanding of the theoretical framework and when necessary to reference the framework, so that students have a consistent context to their learning.

Thirdly, the flexibility of curriculum is of paramount importance since it will help tutors to meet diverse group needs, build rapport with the students and foster a safe learning environment. Tutors could either ask students at the beginning of the course on their preferred topics to be covered or to enrich the learning material with students' preferences during the course. Evaluation forms or verbal evaluations could be used for this purpose.

Forth, it might be helpful to undertake a students' screening process before the course, if this is feasible. This would allow tutors to evaluate the coherence of the group and explore strategies that would prevent any dropouts from the course. Consideration should be given to student's preferences, expectations and motivation to participate in the course. An evaluation of their experience and previous knowledge to the topic should also be considered.

Fifth, reflection needs to be introduced gradually to the course. In this course, tutors introduced the first level of reflection during the first semester and progressively introduced the second and third level of reflection towards the end of the course. We decided to present reflection as progressive stages, with the first stage referring to identification and description of factors affecting health and well-being. The second level was then focused on the association of these factors with students' everyday life while the third stage was about critically evaluating and actively taking action to change behaviours relevant to health and wellbeing. Assignments with relevance to the aim of the reflection were

introduced at the first semester and gradually increased the complexity (e.g. critique and goal setting toward action) and need for reflection on the topic. During this process, tutors need to take into consideration and treat with confidentiality any sensitive and/or personal details. Students need to be informed through this process on the confidentiality of the topics discussed and also on their right to participate or not on the reflection activities, without this affecting their overall assessment. To achieve this, tutors need to provide alternative options of evaluation (e.g. using academic references only and not reflection). However, it should be mentioned that in our case, students were more keen to start their reflections and use academic references to review and critique their own experiments and vice versa.

Overall, reflection can be a useful tool to teaching and learning according to our experience. Nevertheless, more research is required to evaluate the effectiveness of reflective writing in different educational courses and contexts and in students' everyday practice and general well being.

## 5. Resources

This course was designed and developed from KK and CT contributed to the design and development of specific sessions. The teaching material consisted of power point presentations, course outline, academic and annotated bibliographies and handouts.

## 6. References

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