

## Linking Reflection Practice with Marketing Competencies

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### Abstract

*The role of reflection for students' learning has been long recognised. However, drawbacks of many reflective tasks are missing assessment approaches. Additionally, the potential of using students' reflection for assessing subject competencies is often overlooked.*

*This conceptual paper provides (a) other lecturers with a case study, detailing the implementation and assessment of academic reflections in an undergraduate marketing course; and (b) researchers with preliminary data on students' improved self-reflection and marketing competencies.*

**Keywords:** Marketing; Course Design; Competence-based Assessment; Reflection; Rubric.

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## 1. Introduction

On a conceptual level, Higher Education (HE) Institutions have experienced a significant transformation in teaching and learning over the past decade. Competence-based education has replaced content-only based education, which allows lecturers to better prepare students for their future roles (European Commission, 2023). For business students, these competencies range from content-related (e.g. market research, new marketing technologies) to interpersonal skills, in particular reflection skill (Schön, 1983; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2012; Reilly, 2018).

On an operational level however, simple examples of how to integrate and assess reflection skills in marketing classes, both for increased reflective practice but also content-related marketing competencies, are missing. Additionally, the perspective of lecturers (contrary to the student voice) is often not very central in many recent studies.

In this paper we present our multi-year project of how to integrate and assess academic reflections with the aim to increase students' marketing competencies. We present findings on increased reflective practice across various formats and on the development and application of

assessment rubrics. Our research contributes to innovation in teaching and learning experiences, especially to the development and assessment of competence-based education in HE.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Method**

Over the last decade, extensive research has focused on the usefulness and application of reflections for various learning experiences, starting with the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Kreber (2004) clearly summarised that although most learners report that they engage in self-reflection, they have different conceptions of what this means due to the broad possible scope and focus. For this paper, we follow the definitions of Reilly (2018) who identified three key learning objectives for business students in their reflective tasks: (a) connecting academic class concepts with personal experience, (b) reflecting on this experience to analyse what happened, and the potential to change and (c) developing self-awareness in recognising their role in the experience. When designing these reflection tasks, lecturers need to create a supportive learning environment which consists of examples, clear instructions, and regular feedback on the achieved depth of reflection (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Veine et al., 2019).

Several studies expand on the measurement of depth of reflection (Kember et al., 2008; Cheng & Chau, 2009), with Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018) suggesting the use of *mental language* by the students according to five categories, ranging from 0-non-reflective, 1-declarative reflective, 2-relational reflective, 3-interpretative reflective to 4-critical reflective. The depth of reflection was shown to increase over time when students had the opportunity to submit several reflections and receive feedback during one semester (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018), as at the start students are not familiar with the reflection process and submit descriptive reflections.

The most common reflection format is a written reflection. Forms such as the creation of videos for the reflection (video reflection) or the discussion of individual reflections within a group (peer reflection) can be used and have been shown to result in deeper reflection due to the higher motivation of the students (Cheng & Chau, 2009; Veine et al., 2019). When assessing students' reflections, the highest achieved level of mental language within the entire reflection is recommended to be used to indicate the students' reflective practice (Kember et al., 2008). This is consistent with the usual approach to allocating categories in qualitative research.

Students' reflection in HE can address different domains such as academic reflection, personal development, interpersonal engagement and professional development (Ash & Clayton, 2009), depending on the learning objectives. In many subject-related courses, such as marketing or finance, a reflection focussing purely on personal development is considered insufficient to assess the content-based competencies of the course. These subject competencies are usually broken down into specific learning objectives, addressing the different learning categories according to Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Assessing higher levels of learning objectives such as "Creating & Evaluating" cannot easily be done by end-of-semester formative

examination, and an assessment such as students' reflections can offer a valid alternative (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Kember et al., 2008; Reilly, 2018).

Providing clear instruction for students' reflections and assessing them afterwards is rather complex, and several suggestions for an assessment approach exist. Reilly (2018) presented a grading sheet with six criteria, of which the most important are "Evidence of Reflection" and "Connection to Course Content", totalling to 50% of the grade. In two dimensional rubrics, several categories relating to the learning cycle and linking to the course content, learning objectives and academic models are individually assessed in terms of depth of reflection. Research agrees that rubrics allow for quicker and more consistent marking. A well-defined rubric will also allow students to better understand key requirements for the reflection task (Brock University, n.d.; The University of Edinburgh, n.d.).

This conceptual paper shows how the creation of a supportive learning environment increased reflective practice of marketing students, even across different formats. Moreover, the paper provides a detailed assessment rubric for other marketing lecturers, allowing them to design and grade students' reflections which are linked to marketing competencies.

### **3. Innovation Project and Changes to Marketing Course**

This study was undertaken at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW), School of Business. The FHNW is a medium-sized teaching and applied research university with around 2500 undergraduate business students. Funding is provided for teaching innovations which allowed the authors to systematically research the introduction of students' reflections into an established marketing course. Whereas before 2020, the assessment of this marketing course consisted of a summative written exam, the lecturers were keen to use reflection papers to increase the reflection competence which is considered relevant for business leaders (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2012; Reilly, 2018). Additionally, they wanted to investigate how to assess complex marketing competencies (e.g. evaluating different product development models, creating a value proposition) which they were unable to evaluate in written exams.

For this study, data was collected from classes of undergraduate students in the final semester of their BSc International Management degree (see Table 1). These students were in the final course of a 20 ECTS marketing specialisation and in spring 2020, 27 students attended this class. Subsequent cohorts of students consisted of 22 (in 2021) and 26 (in 2022) students.

During the semester students had to submit four different reflections, two in written format, one as a video and one as a summary of an oral peer reflection. Each submission focussed on different learning experiences such as class discussion or group projects. The overall assessment of this course consisted of a graded group project and an oral individual exam, with the reflections only providing students with 10% individual learning points. The lecturers created a

supportive learning environment which consisted of clear task descriptions, reflection examples, videos on the importance of reflection, and detailed personal examples. Additionally, lecturers provided students with written feedback after each submission. At the end of the semester, students completed a survey which addressed key questions about their learning style and their perception of the usefulness of the learning environment for reflection. The same survey questions were subsequently used for the cohorts in 2021 and 2022. The survey results from 2020 strongly confirmed that students consider a positive learning environment, which allows them to train their reflective practice, as essential for the successful implementation of reflection (Miller & Staley, 2021). A separate research part further analysed the students' perspective and additionally included in depth qualitative research of the submitted reflections (Miller et al., 2023). Note that the student voice is not the central focus of this conceptual paper.

**Table 1. Overview of multi-cohort study including key information**

	2020 cohort	2021 cohort	2022 cohort
Course	Specialisation Marketing, 27 students, switched to on-line teaching, 4 reflections	Specialisation Marketing, 22 students, online teaching, 3 reflections	Specialisation Marketing, 26 students, on campus teaching, 3 reflections
Study step & key focus	Start of research project, understanding of students' reflective practice over different formats	Optimisation of task description for three reflections and of learning environment	Linking of reflection to marketing competencies
Research method	Content analysis and categorisation of 4 reflections to identify critical reflective level	Qualitative research into students' perceptions (Miller & Staley, 2021) and into student engagement (Miller et al., 2023)	Comparison between survey results (longitudinal) of students' perception on usefulness of reflection
Key learnings	Students' reflection practice increased due to supportive learning environment; video and peer format indicate deeper reflection	Observed increased student engagement; students' perceptions indicating benefits of learning environment & varying preferences for formats.	Reflection practice, linked to marketing competencies; students' perceptions indicating increased deep content learning
Changes	Reduction from 4 to 3 reflections due to high workload for students	Introduction of assessment rubric including marketing competencies for 2022	Dissemination of rubrics to other lecturers

Systematic content analysis was performed on all submitted reflections of the 2020 cohort, which consisted of coding of written reflections (twice 2-page reports), videos (2-min videos) and summaries of peer reflections (1-page report) for 27 students. The categories of reflection depths according to Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018) were used, with the highest achieved level

of mental language within the entire submitted reflection indicating the students' reflective practice (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Number of students (2020 cohort) achieving different reflection levels per format**

Reflection level	Description	Written paper 1	Written paper 2	Video reflection	Peer reflection	Total of 4
	Total # of students	27	27	27	27	27
0	Non-reflective	0	0	0	0	0
1	Declarative refl.	0	0	0	0	0
2	Relational reflective	11	2	4	5	22
3	Interpretative refl.	10	17	9	12	48
4	<b>Critical reflective</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>38</b>
	% of Critical refl.	22%	30%	52%	37%	35%
	Average level	2.8	3.2	3.4	3.2	
	Standard deviation	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.7	

#### 4. Observations and Learnings

During the semester, students on average improved their reflective practice from under 3 (corresponding to “interpretative reflective”) to above 3. Whereas at the beginning of the semester, 11 students only achieved as a maximum “relational reflective” depth, this number decreased strongly over the semester during which training and feedback on reflection were provided. Interestingly, the videos and peer reflections submitted by the students showed the strongest indication of deep reflection as measured by mental language, which could be linked to the higher motivation as predicated by Cheng and Chau (2009) and Veine (2019). A closer analysis of the type of student who submitted “critical reflective” content shows no dependency on gender or type of study (part-time versus full-time).

**Table 3. Included learning incidents per format**

Description	Written paper 1	Written paper 2	Video reflection	Peer reflection
Average # of learning incidents	31.5	78.0	20.4	24.5
Standard deviation	7.9	26.3	6.3	6.5
Critical reflective (see Table 2)	6	8	14	10

When coding the different reflections, we noted the number of “learning incidents”, i.e. a student elaborating on a relevant learning experience in individual reflections (see Table 3). We only used these learning incidents for the categorisation according to levels introduced by Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018) and excluded parts in the reflections where students had provided non-relevant descriptions. In the second written paper, students were able to better understand the task and clearly focussed on relevant learning experiences in their reflections (more than twice

as much relevant content in their submissions). Strikingly, the submitted videos and peer reflections consisted of fewer included learning incidents, however in these formats more students demonstrated critical reflective level. We interpret this finding as an indication of the suitability of the video and peer reflection format as it seems to allow more students to reflect deeply while demonstrating more relevance in the overall submission.

At the end of the spring 2020 course, students were examined in an oral exam. In our data we could not find indications, however, that students with stronger reflective practice achieved better exam results. We therefore tried to strengthen the link of the reflection to the course's learning objectives with a detailed assessment rubric (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Assessment rubrics including marketing competences (based on Kember et al., 2008).**

	<b>Reflection on existing marketing knowledge</b>	<b>Connection to <u>academic marketing</u> concept</b>	<b>Evidence of development</b>
Critical reflection	Critically reviews existing marketing knowledge, <u>questions assumptions</u> , and <u>articulates new perspectives</u>	Demonstrates <u>superior connection</u> between learning experience and class content (marketing concepts/theories) and literature; evidence of <u>application of theory and reconstruction of perspective</u>	Articulates <u>transformation of their perspective</u> about a particular marketing issue/concept/ problem as a result of learning experience.
Reflection	Active and careful consideration of existing marketing knowledge and articulates new understanding of knowledge because of learning experience	Demonstrates clear connections between experience and class content (marketing concepts/theories); evidence of application of theory	Articulates new understanding/insights about a particular marketing issue/concept/ problem as a result of learning experience
Understanding	Makes use of existing marketing knowledge without an attempt to appraise knowledge; shows understanding but does not relate to learning experiences	Connects experience with class content (marketing concepts/theories) but remains superficial or abstract or too general	Limited/superficial insight about a particular marketing issue/concept/ problem as a result of learning experience
Non-reflection	Automatic responses with little conscious reference to existing marketing knowledge; responses are offered without attempting to understand them	Connections are not drawn between experience and class content (marketing concepts/theories) or literature	No evidence of insights about a particular marketing issue/concept/ problem as a result of learning experience

The motivation for this decision was also driven by the anticipated resistance from lecturers at the business school who might consider assessment by reflection as rather arbitrary with missing links to “hard” learning objectives and subject competencies. The rubric was developed in line with published research and examples from other universities (Kember et al., 2008; Brock University, n.d.; The University of Edinburgh, n.d.). Three learning steps, consisting of “Reflection on Existing Marketing Knowledge”, “Connection to Academic Marketing Concept”, and “Evidence of Development”, are explained in the context of the course, with varying depths of reflection. The rubric was discussed with students of the 2022 cohort at the start of semester. The aim was to encourage students to increase links to marketing theory and course learning objectives and to differentiate this academic reflection from personal reflection. As in previous years, students of the 2022 cohort were asked in the end-of semester survey about the usefulness of reflection for both personal development and different learning activities represented by Bloom’s learning categories (see Table 5). As expected, students from all cohorts saw reflection to be useful for personal development, however the introduction of the rubric for the 2022 cohort resulted in an increase of students who consider reflection useful for “Creating and evaluating new ideas and concepts”, indicating deeper content learning. We interpret this finding as an indication of the usefulness of rubrics for encouraging business students to achieve complex marketing competencies.

**Table 5. Students’ perceptions of usefulness of reflection, based on survey for several cohorts**

Usefulness of reflection for:	2020 cohort	2021 cohort	2022 cohort
Remembering and understanding theory	36%	55%	48%
Analysis and applying theory to new problems	36%	30%	35%
Creating and evaluating new ideas and concepts	32%	30%	57%
Personal development	80%	80%	78%

## **5. Conclusions**

This paper confirmed the usefulness of reflection for students’ learnings in HE. Specifically, our findings suggest that the use of reflections for assessment can improve achievement of learning objectives and foster a deeper understanding of course material. In addition, our project generated significant interest among other lecturers within the business school and reflective tasks and rubrics are now established in other courses. While we can show benefits of the use of reflection, this paper which focussed mainly on the perspective of the lecturers remains exploratory in nature.

Additionally, some methodological limitations, such as the small sample size and the absence of broader generalisability across subjects, need to be mentioned. Further research could

explore the application of our findings to various educational settings and subjects, while integrating the students' and lecturers' perspectives.

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