



An Exploratory Study on Assessing Reflective Writing from Teachers' Perspectives

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1 1 **An Exploratory Study on Assessing Reflective Writing from Teachers' Perspectives**

2 3 4 5 2 6 7 8 3 **Abstract**

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10 4 With the society increasingly valuing soft skills and competencies, reflective practices are more
11
12 5 commonly adopted in higher education particularly for experiential learning. As reflective
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14 6 writing is becoming a part of official assessments in many courses, an overarching question
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16 7 arises on how teachers are currently assessing reflections. This study explores teachers'
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18 8 perspectives on the assessment of written reflections by interviewing six university teachers in
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20 9 Hong Kong, who respectively assessed written reflections by 135 students. Teachers'
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22 10 understandings of reflective writing, teachers' understandings of assessing reflections, as well
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24 11 as teacher training are discussed in this exploratory study. The findings provide insight into
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26 12 how reflection is currently understood among teachers, also offering suggestions for reflective
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28 13 practices in higher education.

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30 14 **Keywords:** Reflection; reflective writing; assessment; experiential learning; teacher
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1 Introduction

2 Most higher education institutions, including Hong Kong universities, designate generic
3 competences such as creativity, critical thinking, global citizenship, and leadership as their
4 graduate attributes (Authors, 2013). Yet traditional teaching and assessment approaches are
5 failing to show evidence of developing these learning outcomes, and institutions are turning to
6 alternative learning approaches, such as experiential learning, to fulfil these outcomes. Written
7 reflections are now commonly used to assess students' learning outcomes in experiential
8 learning. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of employing reflection in the
9 learning process to provide students with the opportunity to think deeply (McGuire, Lay, &
10 Peters, 2009; Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017; Authors, 2019). By encouraging students to think
11 deeply of their own and their peers' actions and experiences, reflective writing can help develop
12 students both personally and professionally (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). With accumulating
13 evidence that students in higher education show low levels of reflections (Lucas & Fleming,
14 2012; O'Connell & Dymont, 2004), research has mainly focused on investigating students'
15 perspectives regarding reflective activities (Coleman & Willis, 2015). However, an equally
16 important question, less researched, is how teachers are assessing students' written reflections.
17 Some research has been conducted, but mainly in the context of teacher and medical education
18 (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Mansvelder-Longayroux et al., 2007). It would be pertinent to
19 understand how teachers outside of these two disciplines in higher education are assessing
20 students' written reflections.

21 Assessing reflections is more difficult than established assessment approaches due to
22 the personal and exploratory nature of such activity. In a review by Dymont and O'Connell
23 (2011), eleven articles were examined, and the analysis revealed little to no consistency around
24 the mechanisms and processes of assessing reflections. **As teachers' understandings of
25 reflective writing inevitably influence how they engage students with reflection and how they**

1 assess the writing (O'Connor, Hide, & Treacy, 2003), there is a need to explore teachers'
2 perspectives on the assessment of reflective writing. This study aims to fill this gap in the
3 research.

4 5 **Literature Review**

6 ***Reflection in Learning***

7 Reflection depends on making sense of, or critically evaluating, an experience to achieve new
8 ideas (Kolb, 1984). Various frameworks and models of reflection have been developed for
9 reflective practices in the educational context (for a review see Tsingos, Bosnic-Anticevich, &
10 Smith, 2014). While the models may differ in their components, a common idea shared by all
11 models is the relationship between experience and reflection, stressing the centrality of
12 reflections to experiential learning.

13 Reflection, or reflective practice, is integral to learning as it enables one to examine his
14 or her own and others' implicit assumptions to bring about transformed thinking (Mezirow,
15 1997; Schön, 1983). In general, reflection can be personal, professional, or academic. Personal
16 reflection concerns one's private journeys, which may involve spiritual growth, self-
17 exploration, therapy, and identity searching (Moon, 2006). Academic or professional reflection,
18 on the other hand, is focused, purposeful (Cowan, 2013), and commonly associated with
19 assessment (Ryan & Ryan, 2012). In academic contexts, reflection is primarily assessed by
20 written work or oral interviews (Koole et al., 2011; Moon, 2006). Recently, there is an
21 emphasis on multimodality in reflection that integrates the use of multimedia and artistic
22 activities to address issues of diversity and motivation in reflective practice (Barton & Ryan,
23 2014; Koole et al., 2011; Yuan & Mak, 2018).

24 ***Reflective Writing as a Mode of Reflection***

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3 1 Among the various reflective practices in higher education, reflective journals or reflective
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5 2 writing has been one of the most widely adopted methods. Reflective writing is a mode of
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7 3 reflection that allows one to express “unproven hunches” and “still-forming hypotheses” via
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9 4 “a relatively informal and conversational way” (Cook-Sather, Abbot, & Felten, 2019, p. 15).
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11 5 Besides, reflective writing can provide a type of brave space, which Arao and Clemens (2013)
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13 6 proposed to encourage honest sharing of inner thoughts. It is an analytical activity through
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15 7 which the writer understands and turns experience into learning (Boud, 2001). Reflective
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17 8 writing is more personal for students: the focus is on encouraging students to be exploratory,
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19 9 to question their learning experiences, and allowing them to acquire new understandings or
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21 10 revelations after reflecting. Researchers have studied different types of reflective journals
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23 11 including online blogs (De Andres Martínez, 2012), structured entries (Shumack, 2010),
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25 12 progressive journal keeping (Chitpin, 2006), and end-of-programme submissions (Leberman
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27 13 & Martin, 2004). Reflective writing under different contexts such as student work placements
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29 14 (Skyles & Dean, 2013) and service learning (Schmidt & Brown, 2016), and in different
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31 15 disciplines such as social work (Newcomb, Burton, & Edwards, 2018), psychotherapy (Sutton,
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33 16 Townend & Wright, 2007) and teacher education (Hobbs, 2007) has also been researched.
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40 17 Moon (2004) identified four progressive levels of reflective writing: (1) descriptive
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42 18 writing which lacks reflection; (2) descriptive account with some reflection; (3) reflective
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44 19 writing 1 in which frames of reflection were recognized but limited; and (4) reflective writing
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46 20 2 where description is evidence of a process of reflection. Thus, the depth of reflection in
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48 21 students’ reflective writing can be expected to be measured through the four levels mentioned.
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50 22 The fourth level of reflection is considered as critical reflection during which meaning is
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52 23 attached to experiences and deep learning is likely to take place (Tsingos et al., 2014).
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54 24 Accordingly, this type of reflection is referred to as deep reflection in this study as a
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1 connotation of deep learning. However, research revealed that reflective writing of higher
2 education students is mostly at the descriptive level (e.g., Lucas & Fleming, 2012).

3 *Teachers' Perceptions of Assessing Reflective Writing*

4 According to Ryan and Ryan (2012), "careful consideration is needed to plan deliberate and
5 explicit strategies for improving students' reflective learning in higher education" (p.248),
6 which includes the use of reflective writing. To integrate reflective writing in the classroom,
7 teachers need to take into account the assessment of student reflection, which is fraught with a
8 range of issues. Studies have identified challenges associated with assessing reflective writing,
9 such as potential infringement on students' privacy (Ghaye, 2007), having little to no structure
10 provided to students (Mills, 2008), effectiveness of rubrics for reflective writing (Authors,
11 2019), assigning grades to students' journals (Chandler, 1997), cultural and contextual
12 concerns in assessing (English, 2001), and the authenticity of reflection (Stuart & Richardson,
13 2000; Sutton et al., 2007).

14 Currently, few studies have considered reflective writing from the educators'
15 perspectives. One identified concern is the lack of teacher training (apart from non student-
16 teacher) on effective reflective writing (O'Connell & Dymont, 2003). In addition, Bloxham
17 (2009) indicated that despite the presumption that educators in higher education have a
18 common understanding of academic standards, assessment is chiefly in the subjective hands of
19 tutors. This is vitally important as continuous assessments are often the duties of teaching
20 assistants and postgraduates, who have little to no teaching experience let alone training to
21 assess reflective writing. When it comes to marking reflections, Grainger and Weir (2016)
22 wrote that there is "no compromise of assessment integrity and reliability in terms of teacher
23 judgements" (p. 75). Teachers, when depending on personal judgement in assessing written
24 reflections, may fail to achieve valid and consistent assessment "because they have to judge
25 selective descriptions without being able to verify their adequacy" (Koole et al., 2011, p5).

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3 1 However, researchers seldom investigated teachers' perspectives regarding the assessment of
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5 2 reflective writing, especially in the context of experiential learning.
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8 3 Investigating the issues related to assessing reflective writing in Hong Kong is
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10 4 particularly important because students with Asian heritage tend to be more sensitive to
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12 5 negative judgement (Johnson, 2007). Students' self-consciousness and feelings of social
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14 6 anxieties might hinder the practice of reflective writing in Hong Kong, but current literature on
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16 7 the assessment of reflective writing remains largely from Western institutions. As pointed out
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18 8 by Boud and Walker (1998), reflective practices are "highly context-specific and that the social
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20 9 and cultural context in which reflection takes place has a powerful influence over what kinds
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22 10 of reflection it is possible to foster" (p. 191). Despite growing research regarding reflective
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24 11 writing in higher education institutions in Hong Kong (Ip et al., 2012; Shek & Wu, 2013),
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26 12 research has neglected teachers' perspectives. The current gap of research suggests that
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28 13 exploration into the assessment of reflective writing in Asian countries is needed, particularly
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30 14 focusing on teachers' perspectives.
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39 16 **Current Study**

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42 17 This research is an exploratory study, with the aim to explore teachers' perspectives on the
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44 18 assessment of students' written reflections in higher education in Hong Kong. The following
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46 19 research questions will be addressed in this study:
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- 49 20 1. What are Hong Kong university teachers' understandings of reflective writing?
- 50 21 2. How do Hong Kong university teachers understand the assessment of written reflections?
- 51 22 3. How prepared are university teachers in Hong Kong (in terms of professional development
52 23 and training) to assess students' reflections?
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3 1 4. What are Hong Kong university teachers' suggestions to improve the current practices of
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5 2 assessing students' written reflections?
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10 4 **Method**

11 5 *Participants*

12 6 Purposeful sampling was conducted to recruit six out of nine university teachers who
13 7 participated in an extracurricular experiential learning programme to enhance students' generic
14 8 skills (e.g., team work, creativity, self-confidence), in Hong Kong universities. The programme
15 9 included reflective writing activity in which the students reflected on their learning of generic
16 10 skills during the programme. The recruited teachers included three in-service teachers and three
17 11 teaching assistants, allowing for personal explanations of their experience from the perception
18 12 of different levels of teaching experience ($M_{\text{age}} = 31.33$, $SD = 8.98$). The participants were 4
19 13 females and 2 males, the selection homogenous with all recruited participants having grown up
20 14 in Hong Kong to reduce variation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Among the recruited participants, the
21 15 in-service teachers have a certain amount of teaching experience in higher education
22 16 institutions (in psychology, education and linguistics respectively), whereas the teaching
23 17 assistants were fresh graduates with little to no teaching experience (with majors in social
24 18 sciences, law and education respectively). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the
25 19 participants, code names were given to them, as Teacher E, Teacher J, Teacher M, Assistant J,
26 20 Assistant L, and Assistant R. All of the participants signed informed consent to participate in
27 21 this study, and the study was approved by the ethical committee at the university.
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53 22 *Research Design and Procedure*

54 23 Qualitative research was employed to better understand the totality of teachers' perceptions
55 24 towards the assessment of reflective writing after they were involved in the assessment of
56 25 reflective writing. The programme was a non-credit-based 5-day programme in which first-

1 and second-year undergraduate students from different disciplines (e.g., engineering, social
2 science, science, law, arts, medicine, business) of six universities in Hong Kong were involved
3 in various activities to improve their generic skills (e.g., interviewing local community,
4 entrepreneurial and team work activities). Written reflections, with basic prompt questions
5 asking students to reflect on what they have learnt and how they will do differently, were
6 collected from 135 students at the end of the experiential learning programme.

7 The six participants in this study respectively assessed all 135 reflections submitted by
8 the students. Marking was conducted on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = poor; 5 = excellent). Semi-
9 structured in-depth interviews with participants followed, which were one-on-one interviews
10 to seek understanding of teachers' perspective and their experience in assessing reflective
11 writing. The interviews focused on questions about: teachers' understanding of reflective
12 writing, teachers' understanding of assessing reflections, teachers' professional development
13 on reflections, and their suggestions to improve reflection assessment practices. Three
14 university teachers were invited to review the interview questions to ensure the questions were
15 clearly understood and were aligned with the objectives of the study.

16 ***Data analysis***

17 Content analysis was performed on the data collected in the interviews. In data coding, similar
18 concepts are "grouped together to form categories and subcategories" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990,
19 p.12). Such coding method enables the identification of categories for better understanding of
20 the participants' inferences.

21 Analysis was guided by the interview questions and themes were derived and analysed,
22 falling into four main categories: Teachers' understanding of reflective writing; Teachers'
23 understanding of written reflections; Professional development; and Suggestions to improve
24 reflection assessment practices. To validate and refine the categories, the codes were given to
25 two coders for validation, who independently coded the data using these categories. Good inter-

1 rater agreement was achieved (Cohen's Kappa = .896). For interpretation validation,
2 participants reviewed the categories identified. The results are explained below.

3 4 **Results**

5 *Teachers' Understanding of Reflective Writing*

6 Teachers' understanding of reflective writing was investigated through questions about the
7 effectiveness of reflective writing and learning outcomes of reflective writing. From the
8 participants' perspectives, the effectiveness of reflection for students depends on the students
9 and may vary for every student. As Teacher J said, "reflection exercise overall helps, though
10 of course the personal benefits vary individually". Yet, students' reflections seemed to help the
11 participants gain better insights into students' individual differences and learning experiences.
12 For instance, Teacher M reported "I understand how students feel about these activities."
13 Assistant R said "I learned that I had to suggest the students how to reflect before letting them
14 do it." and Assistant J stressed "learning outcomes in experiential learning are highly
15 personalized, as each student has different experiences, and hence different learning outcomes."

16 Four out of the six participants considered reflection as an appropriate assessment
17 activity for the development of generic competencies. Teacher E stated: "Generic competency
18 development is very personal and reflective journals can help students document how they
19 improve each day or after each activity." Teacher J reported "I do believe that reflection is a
20 very critical element for personal growth including competency enhancement". Those who did
21 not regard reflection as an appropriate assessment shared apprehension on students being
22 forced to reflect or commented on the difficulty of assessing students' reflections in a written
23 form. As explained by Assistant R and Assistant L respectively, "I believe that we cannot force
24 students to reflect.", "...because I find it difficult to assess students' reflection in a written form
25 for this assessment".

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3 1 Most participants expected the outcomes of reflections to be a reviewing experience
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5 2 that increases students' awareness of the benefits of reflection. For example, Assistant L
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7 3 believed that students would 'become aware of the importance of reflection in their daily
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9 4 encounters' and Teacher M suggested that students would have 'reviewed what they have done'.
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11 5 The participants believed that reflection can enhance students' learning through learning from
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13 6 their experiences and being self-aware in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. As put by
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15 7 Teacher J, "Reflection occurs to me as essential for learning from experiences." Teacher E
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17 8 reported, "it allows them to understand their strengths and weaknesses and identify their areas
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19 9 for improvement." Additionally, Assistant L said: "... helps to avoid ... making similar
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21 10 mistakes". Learning and development of skills, including generic competencies, self-
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23 11 understanding and critical thinking, were mentioned by some participants as reflection
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25 12 outcomes.

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32 13 Participants in this study had varying opinions on whether reflection affects teacher-
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34 14 student relationships. To some (i.e., 4 participants), reflection activities can enhance teacher-
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36 15 student relationships. Assistant R explained: 'As not all students are able and willing to tell
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38 16 teachers their personal feelings, reflection is a platform for teachers to connect with students.'
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40 17 On the other hand, others are unable to see the relationship between reflective practices and
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42 18 teacher-student relationships. Assistant J did not see how reflection and teacher-student
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44 19 relationships were related, whereas Assistant L stated that it depended on the questions in the
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46 20 reflection.

21 ***Teachers' Understanding of Assessing Reflective Writing***

22 The interviewees in this study found students using reflections to assess generic skills to
23 provide evidence of learning and development of generic competencies in higher education, as
24 these skills cannot be assessed by traditional assessments. Teacher E reported:

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3 1 Generic skills development is different from academic achievement in that it
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5 2 cannot be assessed via an exam, and this is probably the reason why teachers
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7 3 and higher education institutions are using reflection to assess generic skills.....
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10 4 I need to assess them to provide evidence of student learning.
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13 5 Other reasons mentioned by the participants include achieving courses' learning outcomes,
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15 6 meeting institutional aims, responding to administrative requirements, and informing future
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17 7 development of programmes in assessing reflective practices.
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21 8 In understanding the assessment of written reflections, participants varied in their
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23 9 approaches, including looking for evidence of deep reflection, writing proficiency of students,
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25 10 word count in reflections, and referring to previous cases of assessed work. Teacher E
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27 11 mentioned looking for "signs of self-awareness, and deep emotions and learnings" and Teacher
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29 12 J focused on the "depth and breadth of reflection". While these participants focused on how
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31 13 reflective the writings were, others considered more. Two interviewees reported that they gave
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33 14 lower grades to students who failed to give concrete examples to support their reflections or
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35 15 who were less comprehensible in their writing. Assistant R referred to word count, while
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37 16 Assistant L mentioned considering writing proficiency, such as grammar and
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39 17 comprehensibility, when assessing reflections.
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45 18 Participants were aware of their own judgement while assessing student reflections.
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47 19 Concerns were voiced on student individuality and the overall perception that student written
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49 20 reflections were not very reflective. Assistant R pointed out problems such as students' mother
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51 21 tongue and learning experiences may vary, which caused challenges in assessing reflection
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53 22 based on "discrepancy between the assumption and reality". Interviewees mostly judged the
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55 23 student reflections they assessed as "descriptive" and the scores given by the interviewees were
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57 24 either 1 (poor) or 2 (fair). When asked for the approximate percentage of descriptive reflections
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3 1 in students' writing compared to reflective reflections, participants' answers ranged from 70%
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5 2 to 95%. Student reflections were described as "short", and five out of six participants indicated
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7 3 that the reflections were "shallow", so marking judgements were made according to other
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9 4 students' reflections. Assistant L claimed that "it's difficult to know if the students truly
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11 5 understand the concept of reflection", and Assistant J resorted to marking and remarking
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13 6 reflections for consistency. All of the participants shared concerns on teacher bias and marking
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15 7 consistency, understanding the need to minimise their personal judgement while assessing
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17 8 reflective writing.
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23 9 Interviewees understood the importance of student self-expression while assessing
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25 10 reflective writing, and suggested that assessing reflections may be unfair. Comments on
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27 11 students' reflections included students providing "model answers" or "edited" answers which
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29 12 were less personal and less concrete, but participants questioned how fair it was to grade
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31 13 students when their reflections were conscious of grading, or when some students seemed to
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33 14 not have learnt much. In turn, two of the participants compared students' reflections while
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35 15 giving grades, while two of the participants did not consider the length of student reflections.
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37 16 As Assistant E said, students "should be allowed to reflect on their experience freely". All of
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39 17 the participants acknowledged that experiences may be dissimilar for students, thus making it
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41 18 difficult to grade students.
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46 19 When asked about the ethical aspect of assessing students' reflections, not all of the
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48 20 participants appeared to have considered it. Two participants thought there were no ethical
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50 21 issues with assessing students' reflections, and one participant was unsure. The rest of the
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52 22 interviewees acknowledged that students' written reflections had to be treated confidentially
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54 23 because they are personal. As explained by Teacher M, "Because student reflection can include
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56 24 an intimately personal experience. Therefore, student reflective journal should not be disclosed
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1 to others”. Similarly, Assistant R stressed that “Reflections are personal. Students may not be
2 willing to expose their emotions to assessors or anyone.”

3 ***Teacher’s Professional Development towards Reflection***

4 Most of the participants interviewed had never been trained to assess students’ reflections.
5 Teacher E and Teacher M remarked that they were not aware of any training opportunities,
6 while Teacher J explained that teachers of higher education institutions ‘generally do not go
7 through much training of this kind’. The lack of training for reflective practices, and the lack
8 of awareness of the provision of such training in higher education institutions, may result in
9 teachers being unconfident and unsure of how they should mark reflections.

10 Indeed, regarding their confidence in marking written reflections in the current study,
11 half of the participants reported having some confidence while the other half reported not being
12 confident. Moreover, all of the participants claimed to be unfamiliar with assessing the task.
13 As Teacher J said, “the present marking activity was a bit novel to me”. While being unfamiliar
14 and not confident with reflective practices, the participants were aware of their uncertainties.
15 For instance, Assistant J mentioned it was “the first time for me to mark reflections”. The in-
16 service teachers in this study were slightly more familiar with assessing students’ reflections
17 than teaching assistants, although all of them commented that they have not received any
18 training on reflective practices. Overall, the participants indicated their lack of experience
19 regarding reflection and found marking reflections difficult.

20 ***Suggestions to Improve Reflections Assessment Practices***

21 Participants noted that improvements are needed for current practices on assessing written
22 reflections. On assessment methods of written reflections, the interviewees suggested to
23 remove any standards or criteria for grading, or adopt a pass/fail grading system. Other methods
24 of marking were suggested, such as Teacher J indicating that teacher commentaries would be

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3 1 a helpful assessment for reflections. Participants also emphasised the importance of providing
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5 2 exemplars for each grade if reflections are to be graded. Assistant L believed it would be more
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7 3 effective for marking if there was a sample of each grade, and Assistant J expressed that apart
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9 4 from examples for each grade, more comprehensive marking guidelines with 'other aspects like
10
11 5 language and organization' would help in marking. While participants pointed out the lack of
12
13 6 exemplars causing confusion in assessing reflections, this proves the importance of including
14
15 7 exemplars in reflection marking guidelines for teachers. Some participants stressed that in order
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17 8 for higher education students to benefit from reflective activities, the assessment of reflections
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19 9 should not include grades. Rather, the focus should be on the process of learning.
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25 10 In the interviews, participants expressed that reflective practices could have room for
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27 11 adaptations, stressing that students should feel comfortable in reflecting. As Teacher M
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29 12 mentioned, it is important that 'students can clearly deliver what they want to deliver, without
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31 13 language barrier or struggle which may hinder their thought', thus, students should be allowed
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33 14 to reflect in their mother tongue even if that is not the language used for medium of instruction.
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35 15 The participants agreed that other reflection methods which show evidence of ongoing process
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37 16 of learning, such as diaries or daily journals, are crucial. Four out of six participants supported
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39 17 the use of communicative reflections, including interviews, talking to students, counselling
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41 18 opportunities and so on. The interviewees particularly preferred discussion, suggesting that
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43 19 communicating with the students directly would be a better assessment method and would
44
45 20 enhance teacher-student relationship. However, two participants expressed doubt that
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47 21 communicative reflections can be more challenging for students. As explained by Assistant J,
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49 22 "students might be nervous if their reflections are recorded, and when they are asked to talk
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51 23 about their experiences verbally". Similarly, Assistant L addressed that "some students may
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53 24 find it difficult or uncomfortable to convey their ideas via audio or video." The participants
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55 25 also indicated that applying different methods of reflection may be more effective, as Teacher
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3 1 M said, with “multi-sources provided by the students, it would facilitate teacher to assess
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5 2 student reflections”.

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10 11 12 4 **Discussion**

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14 5 Findings reveal that participant teachers ascribed different meanings to reflective writing,
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16 6 which manifests teachers’ two constructions of reflection – (1) reflection as an assessment
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18 7 and learning tool; and (2) reflection as a cognitive, affective and social process. These two
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20 8 constructions capture the complex nature of reflective practices as well as underpin teachers’
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22 9 engagement with such practice. Varied understandings of reflective writing point to an urgent
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24 10 need to fine-tune teacher professional development.

25 26 27 28 29 11 ***Reflection as an assessment and learning tool***

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31 12 Although six teachers exhibited different views, the most common understanding is to see
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33 13 reflection as an assessment tool. For students, it is understood that teachers perceived written
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35 14 reflection as a review tool to evaluate their past experience (e.g., Teacher M asserted that
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37 15 students could “reviewed what they have done” and Teacher E believed students could
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39 16 “identify their strengths and weaknesses”). Whereas for teachers, four out of six participants
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41 17 understood reflective writing as an effective assessment tool for generic competency
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43 18 development or “meeting administrative requirements”. Under such thinking, reflection is
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45 19 seen as the “outcome”, rather than the “process” that is valued and emphasized (Stewart &
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47 20 Richardson, 2000). O’Connor et al. (2003) cautioned that this is dangerous because reflective
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49 21 practice is seen as “an isolated dimension of their [students’] learning” (p.16), or worse as
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51 22 merely a tool for teachers to assess, rather than a way of thinking that permeates students’
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53 23 learning generally.
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1 Valuing reflection as the outcome (assessment) instead of the process (learning) is not
2 an issue exclusive to our sampled teachers, but to many other more experienced educators
3 worldwide also (e.g., Braine, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2003). The learning potential enabled by
4 reflection is not entirely clear among teachers as they believed that outcomes vary for each
5 student. Although we do acknowledge such conditions as individual differences, teachers'
6 reserved attitudes also reflect their unpreparedness to embrace reflection as "a legitimate,
7 rigorous, and necessary mode of writing in this field" (Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 15)
8 because they tend to perceive reflection as "conditionally" beneficial to those who are
9 capable. As pointed out by Cook-Sather et al. (2019), the mode of reflective writing which
10 includes in-process musing, emotions and identity, and the process of reflection that links
11 analysis and practice make reflective writing legitimate and essential to the scholarship of
12 teaching and learning. Teachers failing to recognise the learning role of reflection may result
13 in a compartmentalised approach to engage students in reflection as a task (Johns, 2004) or
14 for a grade (Chandler, 1997). Therefore, to fully bring out the potential of reflective writing,
15 it is crucial to acknowledge that reflection is both an assessment tool and learning tool.

16 ***Reflection as a cognitive, affective and social process***

17 Teachers' ambivalent attitudes and concerns about assessing reflection reveal that unlike
18 traditional assessment (e.g., exams), assessing reflection requires more than knowledge and
19 involves not only the cognitive process (Beauchamp, 2015; Boud, 2001). There is a huge
20 discrepancy between teachers' awareness in this aspect. While some teachers took into
21 consideration the ethics, consistency and fairness in assessing, others did not even realize
22 these potential issues. As reflection involves self-exploration and is sometimes "emotionally
23 demanding" (Ghaye, 2007), inappropriate or negative assessment might be interpreted as a
24 personal affront and generate unpleasant feelings that destruct learning (Crème, 2005; Varner
25 & Peck, 2003). Therefore, more sophisticated understandings of reflective writing are

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3 1 required (Ryan & Ryan, 2012). Teachers need to consider students' past, present and future
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5 2 experience, alongside their emotions and cultures, in the assessment of reflection (English,
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7 3 2001).

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10 4 Discrepancy of views does not only exist in assessment, but also in the potential of
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12 5 learning through the social and affective domain when creating a supportive environment.
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14 6 Hobbs (2007) cautioned against the difference between voluntary reflection and "forced"
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16 7 reflection as a required component of a course subject to assessment. Such structured
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18 8 reflection gives rise to a range of moral concerns such as issues of personal rights and power
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20 9 (English, 2001; Cotton, 2001) and scholars advocated building a more supportive
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22 10 environment to mitigate these concerns and help students to reflect deeper (Fernsten &
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24 11 Fernsten, 2005; Hobbs, 2007). While some teachers believed reflective writing creates a
25
26 12 "platform for teachers to connect with students" (Assistant R), others failed to see how
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28 13 reflection is ever related to teacher-student relationship (e.g., Assistant J). As well-argued by
29
30 14 many researchers (Driessen, 2017; Ghaye, 2007; Sutton et al., 2007), building trust between
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32 15 teachers and students is important because reflective writing is not only a cognitive and
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34 16 analytical activity, but also a social and affective process where students learn to value their
35
36 17 feelings and establish rapport. To better facilitate "required" written reflection considering its
37
38 18 social and affective nature, teachers are advised to slowly introduce reflection into the
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40 19 curriculum, allow students to choose their preferred format and even refrain from assessing
41
42 20 reflection in early stages (Hobbs, 2007).

21 ***Reflection as a professional development pathway***

22 Teachers' varied constructions of reflective writing point to a limitation in teacher
23 professional development. As the interviewed teachers reported that they were not aware of
24 training opportunities (or maybe there is not any), it is unsurprising that some teachers would
25 see reflection simply as an assessment tool or a merely cognitive process. This may also

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3 1 account for the difference in teachers' marking standards (e.g., word count; language).
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5 2 Helping teachers develop mature and well-rounded understandings of reflection is important
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7 3 because teachers would possibly bring their prescribed constructions into reflective practices,
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9 4 influence how reflection is actually conducted, and thus impact student learning (O'Connor et
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11 5 al., 2003). Especially as Hong Kong education is traditionally very teacher-centred, textbook-
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13 6 centred, and test-centred (Adamson, Kwan, & Chan, 2000), and Asian students tend to be
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15 7 sensitive to criticism (Johnsons, 2007), teachers' knowledge and mind-sets of reflection
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17 8 should be better prepared.
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22 9 In addition, interviewees tended to relate reflection solely to student learning without
23
24 10 seeing its relevance to their own teaching practices, which echoes what Hatton and Smith (1995)
25
26 11 commented that reflection is "not generally associated with working as a teacher" (p.36). Prior
27
28 12 studies argued that reflection was suitable to examine teaching (Brookfield, 1995; Beauchamp,
29
30 13 2015) because it allows teachers to reflect on their own practices (Loughran, 2002). How
31
32 14 reflection contributes to the continuing development of teachers should also be highlighted in
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34 15 professional training programmes.
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43 17 **Limitations and Future Studies**

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45 18 Involving six teachers from local universities in Hong Kong with local background, the nature
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47 19 of the current study is exploratory and research results are not generalisable. Moreover, the
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49 20 participants of the current research were less experienced educators, despite having teaching
50
51 21 duties in assessing student work. The participants' perspectives may not represent all teachers
52
53 22 but are rich enough to generate insights into the issue under research. The next phase of this
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55 23 study could be to try a teacher training intervention in reflective writing and compare the same
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57 24 teachers' perspectives. It is also advisable for future studies to include a larger sample of
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3 1 educators in the Asian regions. Another possible direction is to focus on more experienced
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5 2 teachers along with less experienced teachers in investigation of teaching and assessing
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8 3 reflection, to include wider perspectives.
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10 4 Due to time and resource limitations, along with workload concerns, although each
11
12 5 participant assessed 135 reflections respectively, the participants assessed only one reflective
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15 6 exercise within the programme. This restricts the variations of reflections assessed. Future
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17 7 studies can consider multiple forms of reflection for assessment, or a series of reflections over
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19 8 a learning process, such as before, during and after a programme. While students and teachers
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21 9 alike should have been given more opportunities to practice and understand reflection, this
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23 10 study to a certain extent succeeded to provide insights into teachers' perspectives of reflective
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25 11 practices in Asian higher education institutions.
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29 12 Apart from the above, ethical concerns in relation to reflective practices should be
30
31 13 investigated. The participants in this study doubted the assessment of students' reflections
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33 14 given the personal nature of the reflections. Another topic to explore is the effect of teacher-
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35 15 student relationship on reflective practices. Participants suggested that teacher-student
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37 16 relationship could have an effect on the outcomes of reflections, which encourages further
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39 17 investigation on this issue. It would also be more comprehensive if students' perspectives were
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41 18 compared with teachers' perspectives in terms of how teachers assess reflective writing.
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49 20 **Implications and Conclusion**

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51 21 This study explored teachers' perspectives on the assessing reflective writing in Hong Kong
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53 22 higher education and produced several implications. First, reflection should be seen as both an
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55 23 assessment tool and a learning tool. Teachers should value and emphasise reflection as a
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57 24 process of student learning, instead of focusing on reflection as an outcome of learning. To
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3 1 achieve this goal, teachers are advised to make clear to students the benefits of developing
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5 2 reflection as a way of thinking before engaging them in reflective writing. More formative
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7 3 approaches of assessment instead of summative ones are recommended to help students focus
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9 4 more on the process.
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13 5 Second, when implementing reflective activities, including reflective journals, the
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15 6 teachers should focus on both the process of learning and students' needs because students
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17 7 might be uncomfortable being judged based on personal reflections. Trust and support from
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19 8 teachers are important as reflection involves students' individual self-exploration. Teachers
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21 9 may consider to allow students to choose their preferred format to reflect (e.g., discussions;
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23 10 reflection in students' mother tongue), or even refrain from grading reflection at the early stage.
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27 11 Third, universities particularly in Asia should equip teachers with the essential skills to
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29 12 run reflective activities and assess their outcomes. There is a need for professional development
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31 13 training to prepare the teachers for this task, particularly as interviewed teachers in the present
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33 14 study were not aware of training opportunities. Professional development training for teachers
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35 15 should also highlight how examining students' reflection could contribute to teachers'
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37 16 development.
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