



Improving and evaluating reflective narratives: A rubric for higher education students



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We present a new instrument for the evaluation of the reflective narratives of university students.
- We describe the process of construction of the rubric (elements, indicators and levels).
- The results of a validation process that used the judgements of external experts are presented.
- We conclude that the rubric works well in grading the degree of reflection.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a new instrument for the evaluation and improvement of the reflective narratives of students in higher education: the Rubric for Narrative Reflection Assessment (NARRA). First, we describe the process of construction of the rubric, with its elements, indicators and levels. Second, we present the results of a validation process that used the judgements of external experts, who confirmed the usefulness of the instrument. Third, we show the results of NARRA's first application to students' narratives. We conclude that the new rubric we propose works well in grading the degree of reflection on the basis of subjective texts.

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1. Introduction

The etymological origin of the term *assessment* is the Latin word *assidere*, which means 'to sit down with'. With this in mind, this paper adopts the vision of Kiraly (2000), which views assessment as the process of sitting down and working with students in a mutual search for new knowledge, as well as for the development of new capabilities.

One of the cross-disciplinary abilities that university students need to acquire, regardless of their course of study, is reflective competence. Since Schön (1983) highlighted the importance of reflection in the training process, several authors have explored various aspects of this perspective. Kolb (1984), for example, emphasized that knowledge is created from the transformation of experience. His famous 'experiential learning cycle' considers the following cyclical phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Furthermore, Korthagen (2001), inspired by Kolb's model, described five phases in the reflective process: 1) the action or experience, 2) looking back (on the action), 3) raising awareness

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and identifying important aspects of one's activity, 4) searching for and preparing alternative behaviours to perform and 5) testing their effectiveness in a new situation. This again provides a new experience, and is therefore the starting point for a new cycle of reflection. Then the ideal for the progressive acquisition of reflective competence is described as a continuous alternation between action and reflection.

While students have different predispositions to reflect on an action, it is during their time at university that they should acquire strategies to empower such ability. Teachers, in their role as learning facilitators, have an important task in this respect. Since assessment has a strong impact on the focus and attention of most students, teachers must have effective tools to evaluate students' reflective competence and, at the same time, to improve it. In this sense, the investment in rubrics by teachers and educational institutions responds to a demand for more authentic, complex and motivating forms of assessment (Dochy, Gijbels, & Segers, 2006). The Rubric for Narrative Reflection Assessment (NARRA) that we present in this paper has been developed using this perspective. The aim of this article is to describe the process of construction and validation of the rubric using the judgement of external experts, as well as a pilot application to six reflective texts written by a sample of university students.

2. The improvement and evaluation of reflective competence in higher education

One of the purposes of reflective competence among university students should be the progressive acquisition of tools that enable them to move from what they already know and what they already do (tacit knowledge) to absorb existing scientific knowledge (explicit knowledge) under monitored conditions (Melief, Tigchelaar, & Korthagen, 2010). In the same way, university teachers, as supervisors of the quality of this process of transformation, should have tools available to promote and evaluate the processes of student self-regulation (Carandell, Keim, & Tigchelaar, 2010). In other words, teachers should know the principles governing the creative reconstruction carried out by their students up to the appropriation of scientific knowledge (Galperin, 1989; 1992) and practitioner competence (Schön, 1983).

Schön's perspective on reflective practice has been criticized (Finlay, 2008). Boud and Walker (1998) discuss the fact that Schön's analysis ignores critical features of the context of reflection, while Eraut (2004) dislikes Schön's work for its lack of precision and clarity. Thus, the identification of the regulatory principles of reflective competence is not a trivial issue. As Black and Plowright (2010) explained, the improvement and evaluation of reflective competence is a very complex matter. Among other things, this complexity is driven by the fact that reflective competence cannot be learned from a lecture, which is the conventional form of teaching at university; and nor can it be assessed by examination, which again remains the most common means of assessing students. On the contrary, reflective competence may be attained by promoting reflective critical thinking, which can be addressed through contextualized learning spaces of simulations (Tuticci, Lewis, & Coyer, 2016), assessed with skills resulting from the lesson evaluations (Watts & Lawson, 2009) or action research (Hagevik, Aydeniz, & Rowell, 2012) and measured through instruments that exhibit content validity.

There have been multiple studies on evaluation of the reflective competence of university students in different fields of knowledge, mainly involving a learning portfolio (Canniford, Ortho, & Fox-Young, 2015; Zubizarreta, 2009). Students use learning portfolios to reflect on their development over a specific period of time, and this allows analysis of either student assessment or student

development (Beck, Livne, & Bear, 2005; Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijjaard, & Verloop, 2007). Klecker (2000) advocated that the portfolio should be used to evaluate the achievement of content and performance standards, whereas Darling (2001), for example, proposed student development through narrative reflection as the best way of fostering such development. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) distinguished between *reflection* and *core reflection*: reflection is understood as a systematic way of improving one's practice, while core reflection involves questioning and reframing a person's levels of functioning, such as identity and mission. Core reflection aims at more durable changes in a person than mere reflection.

Some authors conclude that in itself the portfolio is a weak instrument for assessing reflective competence, due to the degree of subjectivity inherent in the assessment (Dekker et al., 2009; McCready, 2007; Serdà & Alsina, 2013; Watson, 2007). For this reason, over the years several rubrics have been developed either to complement the portfolio approach, or to be used independently to promote and evaluate learning and student work. Those are named instructional rubrics (Goodrich, 2000). Although topic-specific rubrics are likely to produce more reliable scores than generic rubrics (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Marzano, 2002), the use of generic rubrics is increasing, since they focus on the development of measures of reflective writing that are reliable, valid and practical to implement (Moniz et al., 2015).

Ward and McCotter (2004) designed a generic rubric to enable pre-service teachers to appraise their critical reflections. The rubric includes three dimensions: a) focus (what is the focus of concern about practice?), b) inquiry (what is the process of inquiry?), and c) change (how does inquiry change practice and perspective?). There are four levels for each dimension: 1) routine (disengaged from change); 2) technical (instrumental response to specific situations without change of perspective); 3) dialogic (inquiry part of the process, involving cycles of situated questions and action, consideration of others' perspectives, new insights); and 4) transformative (fundamental questions and change). Watts and Lawson (2009) noted that the use of the rubric presented by Ward and McCotter (2004) allows students to recognize qualitative changes in the development of skills of critical reflection. Harrison and Lee (2011) also used the rubric of Ward & McCotter to identify changes in the level of reflective critical practice among future teachers; they concluded that in the transformation process, the teacher's skills in relation to dialogue and managing students' emotions are fundamental. Finally, Ryan and Ryan (2012) suggested a multi-level reflective scale for the teaching and assessment of reflective learning in higher education. Adapting the levels provided by Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, and Lester (2002), the authors suggested the following four indicators: 1) reporting and responding; 2) relating; 3) reasoning; and 4) reconstructing.

Based on the levels of reflective thinking, the rubric designed by Kember, McKay, Sinclair, and Wong (2008) was used to assess the level of reflection and non-reflection in writing. This rubric sets four levels to guide the degree of reflection of the written works of students: usual action–non-reflection; understanding; reflection; and critical reflection. Similarly, Wald, Borkan, Taylor, Anthony, and Reis (2012) designed the REFLECT (Reflection Evaluation for Learners' Enhanced Competencies Tool) rubric to evaluate reflective narratives in the field of medical education. It consists of the following indicators that enhance the students' active participation, the cognitive aspects and emotions and critical thinking during the reflective learning process: voice and presence; description of conflict or disorienting dilemma (insight and reflection); attending to emotions; and critical analysis and meaning making. Four levels of reflective capacity are considered, ranging from the usual action to critical reflection: 1) non-reflective: habitual action; 2) non-reflective: thoughtful action; 3) reflective; and 4) critically

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