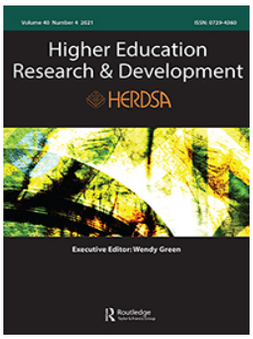

Higher Education Research & Development

ISSN: 0729-4360 (Print) 1469-8366 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cher20

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To cite this article: Cecilia K. Y. Chan, Hannah Y. H. Wong & Jiahui Luo (2021) An exploratory study on assessing reflective writing from teachers' perspectives, Higher Education Research & Development, 40:4, 706-720, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2020.1773769

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1773769

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
2021, VOL. 40, NO. 4, 706–720
https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1773769

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An exploratory study on assessing reflective writing from teachers' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

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

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 September 2019
Accepted 29 April 2020

KEYWORDS
Reflection; reflective writing; assessment; experiential learning; teacher perception

Introduction

Most higher education institutions, including Hong Kong universities, designate generic competences such as creativity, critical thinking, global citizenship, and leadership as their graduate attributes (Chan & Luk, 2013). Yet, traditional teaching and assessment approaches are failing to show evidence of developing these learning outcomes, and institutions are turning to alternative learning approaches, such as experiential learning, to fulfil these outcomes. Written reflections are now commonly used to assess students' learning outcomes in experiential learning. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of employing reflection in the learning process to provide students with the opportunity to think deeply (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017; Cheng & Chan, 2019; McGuire, Lay, & Peters, 2009). By encouraging students to think deeply of their own and their peers' actions and experiences, reflective writing can help develop students both personally and professionally (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). With accumulating evidence that students in higher education show low levels of reflections (Lucas & Fleming, 2012; O'Connell & Dyment, 2004), research has mainly focused on investigating students' perspectives regarding reflective activities (Coleman & Willis, 2015). However, an equally important question, less researched, is how teachers are assessing students' written reflections. Some research has been conducted, but mainly in the context of teacher and medical

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education (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007). It would be pertinent to understand how teachers outside of these two disciplines in higher education are assessing students' written reflections.

Assessing reflections is more difficult than established assessment approaches due to the personal and exploratory nature of such activity. In a review by Dyment and O'Connell (2011), 11 articles were examined, and the analysis revealed little to no consistency around the mechanisms and processes of assessing reflections. As teachers' understandings of reflective writing inevitably influence how they engage students with reflection and how they assess the writing (O'Connor, Hyde, & Treacy, 2003), there is a need to explore teachers' perspectives on the assessment of reflective writing. This study aims to fill this gap in the research.

Literature review

Reflection in learning

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

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

Reflective writing as a mode of reflection

Among the various reflective practices in higher education, reflective journals or reflective writing have been one of the most widely adopted methods. Reflective writing is a mode of reflection that allows one to express 'unproven hunches' and 'still-forming hypotheses' in 'a relatively informal and conversational way' (Cook-Sather, Abbot, & Felten, 2019, p. 15). It is an analytical activity through which the writer understands and turns experience into learning (Boud, 2001). Reflective writing is more personal for students: the focus is on encouraging students to be exploratory, to question their learning experiences, and allowing them to acquire new understandings or revelations after reflecting. Researchers have studied different types of reflective journals including online blogs (De Andres Martinez, 2012), structured entries (Shumack, 2010), progressive journal keeping (Chitpin, 2006),

and end-of-programme submissions (Leberman & Martin, 2004). Reflective writing under different contexts such as student work placements (Sykes & Dean, 2013) and service learning (Schmidt & Brown, 2016), and in different disciplines such as social work (Newcomb, Burton, & Edwards, 2018), psychotherapy (Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007) and teacher education (Hobbs, 2007) has also been researched.

Moon (2004) identified four progressive levels of reflective writing: (1) descriptive writing which lacks reflection; (2) descriptive account with some reflection; (3) reflective writing in which frames of reflection were recognized but limited; and (4) reflective writing where description is evidence of a process of reflection. Thus, the depth of reflection in students' reflective writing can be expected to be measured through the four levels mentioned. The fourth level of reflection is considered as critical reflection during which meaning is attached to experiences and deep learning is likely to take place (Tsingos et al., 2014). Accordingly, this type of reflection is referred to as deep reflection in this study as a connotation of deep learning. However, research revealed that reflective writing of higher education students is mostly at the descriptive level (e.g., Lucas & Fleming, 2012).

Teachers' perceptions of assessing reflective writing

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

Currently, few studies have considered reflective writing from the educators' perspectives. One identified concern is the lack of teacher training (apart from non-student–teacher) on effective reflective writing (O'Connell & Dyment, 2003). In addition, Bloxham (2009) indicated that despite the presumption that educators in higher education have a common understanding of academic standards, assessment is chiefly in the subjective hands of tutors. This is vitally important, as continuous assessments are often the duties of teaching assistants and postgraduates, who have little to no teaching experience let alone training to assess reflective writing. When it comes to marking reflections, Grainger and Weir (2016) wrote that there is 'no compromise of assessment integrity and reliability in terms of teacher judgements' (p. 75). Teachers, when depending on personal judgement in assessing written reflections, may fail to achieve valid and consistent assessment 'because they have to judge selective descriptions without being able to verify their adequacy' (Koole et al., 2011, p. 5). However, researchers seldom investigated teachers' perspectives regarding the assessment of reflective writing, especially in the context of experiential learning.

Investigating the issues related to assessing reflective writing in Hong Kong is particularly important because students with Asian heritage tend to be more sensitive to negative

judgement (Johnson, 2007). Students' self-consciousness and feelings of social anxieties might hinder the practice of reflective writing in Hong Kong, but current literature on the assessment of reflective writing remains largely from Western institutions. As pointed out by Boud and Walker (1998), reflective practices are 'highly context-specific and that the social and cultural context in which reflection takes place has a powerful influence over what kinds of reflection it is possible to foster' (p. 191). Despite growing research regarding reflective writing in higher education institutions in Hong Kong (Ip et al., 2012; Shek & Wu, 2013), research has neglected teachers' perspectives. The current gap of research suggests that exploration into the assessment of reflective writing in Asian countries is needed, particularly focusing on teachers' perspectives.

Current study

This research is an exploratory study, with the aim of exploring teachers' perspectives on the assessment of students' written reflections in higher education in Hong Kong. The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

(1) What are Hong Kong university teachers' understandings of reflective writing?
(2) How do Hong Kong university teachers understand the assessment of written reflections?
(3) How prepared are university teachers in Hong Kong (in terms of professional development and training) to assess students' reflections?
(4) What are Hong Kong university teachers' suggestions to improve the current practices of assessing students' written reflections?

Method

Participants

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

Research design and procedure

Qualitative research was employed to better understand the totality of teachers' perceptions towards the assessment of reflective writing after they were involved in the assessment of reflective writing. The programme was a non-credit-based five-day programme in which first- and second-year undergraduate students from different disciplines (e.g., engineering, social science, science, law, arts, medicine, business) of six universities in Hong Kong were involved in various activities to improve their generic skills (e.g., interviewing local community, entrepreneurial and team work activities). Written reflections, with basic prompt questions asking students to reflect on what they have learnt and how they will do things differently, were collected from 135 students at the end of the experiential learning programme.

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

Data analysis

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

Analysis was guided by the interview questions and themes were derived and analysed, falling into four main categories: Teachers' understanding of reflective writing; Teachers' understanding of written reflections; Professional development; and Suggestions to improve reflection assessment practices. To validate and refine the categories, the codes were given to two coders for validation, who independently coded the data using these categories. Good inter-rater agreement was achieved (Cohen's Kappa = .896). For interpretation validation, participants reviewed the categories identified. The results are explained below.

Results

Teachers' understanding of reflective writing

Teachers' understanding of reflective writing was investigated through questions about the effectiveness of reflective writing and learning outcomes of reflective writing. From the participants' perspectives, the effectiveness of reflection for students depends on the students and may vary for every student. As Teacher J said, 'reflection exercise overall helps, though of course the personal benefits vary individually'. Yet, students' reflections seemed to help the participants gain better insights into students' individual differences and

learning experiences. For instance, Teacher M reported 'I understand how students feel about these activities.' Assistant R said 'I learned that I had to suggest the students how to reflect before letting them do it.' and Assistant J stressed 'learning outcomes in experiential learning are highly personalized, as each student has different experiences, and hence different learning outcomes'.

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

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

Participants in this study had varying opinions on whether reflection affects teacher–student relationships. To some (i.e., four participants), reflection activities can enhance teacher–student relationships. Assistant R explained: 'As not all students are able and willing to tell teachers their personal feelings, reflection is a platform for teachers to connect with students.' On the other hand, others are unable to see the relationship between reflective practices and teacher–student relationships. Assistant J did not see how reflection and teacher–student relationships were related, whereas Assistant L stated that it depended on the questions in the reflection.

Teachers' understanding of assessing reflective writing

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

> Generic skills development is different from academic achievement in that it cannot be assessed via an exam, and this is probably the reason why teachers and higher education institutions are using reflection to assess generic skills … I need to assess them to provide evidence of student learning.

Other reasons mentioned by the participants include achieving courses' learning outcomes, meeting institutional aims, responding to administrative requirements, and informing future development of programmes in assessing reflective practices.

In understanding the assessment of written reflections, participants varied in their approaches, including looking for evidence of deep reflection, writing proficiency of students, word count in reflections, and referring to previous cases of assessed work. Teacher E mentioned looking for 'signs of self-awareness, and deep emotions and learnings' and Teacher J focused on the 'depth and breadth of reflection'. While these participants focused on how reflective the writings were, others considered more. Two interviewees reported that they gave lower grades to students who failed to give concrete examples to support their reflections or who were less comprehensible in their writing. Assistant R referred to word count, while Assistant L mentioned considering writing proficiency, such as grammar and comprehensibility, when assessing reflections.

Participants were aware of their own judgement while assessing student reflections. Concerns were voiced on student individuality and the overall perception that student written reflections were not very reflective. Assistant R pointed out problems such as students' mother tongue and learning experiences may vary, which caused challenges in assessing reflection based on 'discrepancy between the assumption and reality'. Interviewees mostly judged the student reflections they assessed as 'descriptive' and the scores given by the interviewees were either 1 (poor) or 2 (fair). When asked for the approximate percentage of descriptive reflections in students' writing compared to reflective reflections, participants' answers ranged from 70% to 95%. Student reflections were described as 'short', and five out of six participants indicated that the reflections were 'shallow', so marking judgements were made according to other students' reflections. Assistant L claimed that 'it's difficult to know if the students truly understand the concept of reflection', and Assistant J resorted to marking and remarking reflections for consistency. All participants shared concerns on teacher bias and marking consistency, understanding the need to minimize their personal judgement while assessing reflective writing.

Interviewees understood the importance of student self-expression while assessing reflective writing, and suggested that assessing reflections may be unfair. Comments on students' reflections included students providing 'model answers' or 'edited' answers which were less personal and less concrete, but participants questioned how fair it was to grade students when their reflections were conscious of grading, or when some students seemed to not have learnt much. In turn, two of the participants compared students' reflections while giving grades, while two of the participants did not consider the length of student reflections. As Assistant E said, students 'should be allowed to reflect on their experience freely'. All participants acknowledged that experiences may be dissimilar for students, thus making it difficult to grade students.

When asked about the ethical aspect of assessing students' reflections, not all of the participants appeared to have considered it. Two participants thought there were no ethical issues with assessing students' reflections, and one participant was unsure. The rest of the interviewees acknowledged that students' written reflections had to be treated confidentially because they are personal. As explained by Teacher M, 'Because student reflection can include an intimately personal experience. Therefore, student reflective journal should not be disclosed to others'. Similarly, Assistant R stressed that 'Reflections are personal. Students may not be willing to expose their emotions to assessors or anyone.'

Teacher's professional development towards reflection

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

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

Suggestions to improve reflections assessment practices

Participants noted that improvements are needed for current practices on assessing written reflections. On assessment methods of written reflections, the interviewees suggested to remove any standards or criteria for grading, or adopt a pass/fail grading system. Other methods of marking were suggested, such as Teacher J indicating that teacher commentaries would be a helpful assessment for reflections. Participants also emphasized the importance of providing exemplars for each grade if reflections are to be graded. Assistant L believed it would be more effective for marking if there was a sample of each grade, and Assistant J expressed that apart from examples for each grade, more comprehensive marking guidelines with 'other aspects like language and organization' would help in marking. While participants pointed out the lack of exemplars causing confusion in assessing reflections, this proves the importance of including exemplars in reflection marking guidelines for teachers. Some participants stressed that in order for higher education students to benefit from reflective activities, the assessment of reflections should not include grades. Rather, the focus should be on the process of learning.

In the interviews, participants expressed that reflective practices could have room for adaptations, stressing that students should feel comfortable in reflecting. As Teacher M mentioned, it is important that 'students can clearly deliver what they want to deliver, without language barrier or struggle which may hinder their thought', thus, students should be allowed to reflect in their mother tongue even if that is not the language used for medium of instruction. The participants agreed that other reflection methods which show evidence of the ongoing process of learning, such as diaries or daily journals, are crucial. Four out of six participants supported the use of communicative reflections, including interviews, talking to students, counselling opportunities and so on. The interviewees particularly preferred discussion, suggesting that communicating with the

students directly would be a better assessment method and would enhance the teacher–student relationship. However, two participants expressed doubt that communicative reflections can be more challenging for students. As explained by Assistant J, 'students might be nervous if their reflections are recorded, and when they are asked to talk about their experiences verbally'. Similarly, Assistant L addressed that 'some students may find it difficult or uncomfortable to convey their ideas via audio or video'. The participants also indicated that applying different methods of reflection may be more effective, as Teacher M said, with 'multi-sources provided by the students, it would facilitate teacher to assess student reflections'.

Discussion

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

Reflection as an assessment and learning tool

Although six teachers exhibited different views, the most common understanding was to see reflection as an assessment tool. For students, it is understood that teachers perceived written reflection as a review tool to evaluate their past experience (e.g., Teacher M asserted that students could 'review what they have done' and Teacher E believed students could 'identify their strengths and weaknesses'); for teachers, four out of six participants understood reflective writing as an effective assessment tool for generic competency development or 'meeting administrative requirements'. Under such thinking, reflection is seen as the 'outcome', rather than the 'process' that is valued and emphasized (Stewart & Richardson, 2000). O'Connor et al. (2003) cautioned that this is dangerous because reflective practice is seen as 'an isolated dimension of their [students'] learning' (p. 16), or worse as merely a tool for teachers to assess, rather than a way of thinking that permeates students' learning generally.

Valuing reflection as the outcome (assessment) instead of the process (learning) is not an issue exclusive to our sampled teachers, but to many other more experienced educators worldwide also (e.g., Braine, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2003). The learning potential enabled by reflection is not entirely clear among teachers as they believed that outcomes vary for each student. Although we do acknowledge such conditions as individual differences, teachers' reserved attitudes also reflect their unpreparedness to embrace reflection as 'a legitimate, rigorous, and necessary mode of writing in this field' (Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 15) because they tend to perceive reflection as 'conditionally' beneficial to those who are capable. As pointed out by Cook-Sather et al. (2019), the mode of reflective writing which includes in-process musing, emotions and identity, and the process of reflection that links analysis and practice make reflective writing legitimate and essential as a mode of learning and analysis. Teachers failing to recognize the learning role of reflection may result in a compartmentalized approach to engage students in reflection as a task (Johns, 2004) or for a grade

(Chandler, 1997). Therefore, to fully bring out the potential of reflective writing, it is crucial to acknowledge that reflection is both an assessment tool and learning tool.

Reflection as a cognitive, affective and social process

Teachers' ambivalent attitudes and concerns about assessing reflection reveal that unlike traditional assessment (e.g., exams), assessing reflection requires more than knowledge and involves not only the cognitive process (Beauchamp, 2015; Boud, 2001). There is a huge discrepancy between teachers' awareness in this aspect. While some teachers took into consideration the ethics, consistency and fairness in assessing, others did not even realize these potential issues. As reflection involves self-exploration and is sometimes 'emotionally demanding' (Ghaye, 2007), inappropriate or negative assessment might be interpreted as a personal affront and generate unpleasant feelings that destruct learning (Creme, 2005; Varner & Peck, 2003). Therefore, more sophisticated understandings of reflective writing are required (Ryan & Ryan, 2012). Teachers need to consider students' past, present and future experience, alongside their emotions and cultures, in the assessment of reflection (English, 2001).

Discrepancy of views does not only exist in assessment, but also in the potential of learning through the social and affective domain when creating a supportive environment. Hobbs (2007) cautioned against the difference between voluntary reflection and 'forced' reflection as a required component of a course subject to assessment. Such structured reflection gives rise to a range of moral concerns such as issues of personal rights and power (Cotton, 2001; English, 2001) and scholars advocated building a more supportive environment to mitigate these concerns and help students to reflect more deeply (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005; Hobbs, 2007). While some teachers believed reflective writing creates a 'platform for teachers to connect with students' (Assistant R), others failed to see how reflection is ever related to the teacher–student relationship (e.g., Assistant J). As many researchers have argued (Driessen, 2017; Ghaye, 2007; Sutton et al., 2007), building trust between teachers and students is important because reflective writing is not only a cognitive and analytical activity, but also a social and affective process where students learn to value their feelings and establish rapport. To better facilitate 'required' written reflection considering its social and affective nature, teachers are advised to slowly introduce reflection into the curriculum, allow students to choose their preferred format and even refrain from assessing reflection in early stages (Hobbs, 2007).

Reflection as a professional development pathway

Teachers' varied constructions of reflective writing point to a limitation in teacher professional development. As the interviewed teachers reported that they were not aware of training opportunities (or maybe there are not any), it is unsurprising that some teachers would see reflection simply as an assessment tool or a merely cognitive process. This may also account for the difference in teachers' marking standards (e.g., word count; language). Helping teachers develop mature and well-rounded understandings of reflection is important because teachers would possibly bring their prescribed constructions into reflective practices, influence how reflection is actually conducted, and thus impact student learning (O'Connor et al., 2003). Especially as Hong Kong education is

traditionally very teacher-centred, textbook-centred and test-centred (Adamson, Kwan, & Chan, 2000), and Asian students tend to be sensitive to criticism (Johnson, 2007), teachers' knowledge and mind-sets of reflection should be better prepared.

In addition, interviewees tended to relate reflection solely to student learning without seeing its relevance to their own teaching practices, which echoes what Hatton and Smith (1995) comment that reflection is 'not generally associated with working as a teacher' (p. 36). Prior studies argued that reflection was suitable to examine teaching (Beauchamp, 2015; Brookfield, 1995) because it allows teachers to reflect on their own practices (Loughran, 2002). How reflection contributes to the continuing development of teachers should also be highlighted in professional training programmes.

Limitations and future studies

Involving six teachers from local universities in Hong Kong with local backgrounds, the nature of the current study is exploratory and research results are not generalizable. Moreover, the participants of the current research were less experienced educators, despite having teaching duties in assessing student work. The participants' perspectives may not represent all teachers but are rich enough to generate insights into the issue under research. The next phase of this study could be to try a teacher training intervention in reflective writing and compare the same teachers' perspectives. It is also advisable for future studies to include a larger sample of educators in the Asian regions. Another possible direction is to focus on more experienced teachers along with less experienced teachers in investigation of teaching and assessing reflection, to include wider perspectives.

Due to time and resource limitations, along with workload concerns, although each participant assessed 135 reflections respectively, the participants assessed only one reflective exercise within the programme. This restricts the variations of reflections assessed. Future studies might consider multiple forms of reflection for assessment, or a series of reflections over a learning process, such as before, during and after a programme. While students and teachers alike should have been given more opportunities to practice and understand reflection, this study to a certain extent succeeded in providing insights into teachers' perspectives of reflective practices in Asian higher education institutions.

Apart from the above, ethical concerns in relation to reflective practices should be investigated. The participants in this study doubted the assessment of students' reflections given the personal nature of the reflections. Another topic to explore is the effect of the teacher–student relationship on reflective practices. Participants suggested that the teacher–student relationship could have an effect on the outcomes of reflections, which encourages further investigation on this issue. It would also be more comprehensive if students' perspectives were compared with teachers' perspectives in terms of how teachers assess reflective writing.

Implications and conclusion

This study explored teachers' perspectives on assessing reflective writing in Hong Kong higher education and produced several implications. First, reflection should be seen as

both an assessment tool and a learning tool. On one hand, students and teachers need to understand how to use reflections for assessment. They need to understand, as an assessment tool, reflection provides evidence of students' learning experience and enables students to be assessed in a less restricted manner. Teachers need to communicate clearly to students what is expected of reflection in advance (e.g., critical thinking, writing fluency, self-understanding) and discuss with them the standards of assessing (e.g., co-designing rubrics/protocols). On the other hand, teachers and students should value reflection as a process of learning as well. To achieve this goal, teachers are advised to make clear to students the benefits of developing reflection as a way of thinking before engaging them in reflective writing. More formative approaches of assessment instead of summative ones are recommended to help students focus more on the process. The concomitant roles of reflection (assessing and learning) are both important and help maximize learning opportunities in higher education.

Second, when implementing reflective activities, including reflective journals, the teachers should focus on both the process of learning and students' needs because students might be uncomfortable being judged based on personal reflections. Trust and support from teachers are important as reflection involves students' individual self-exploration. Teachers might consider allowing students to choose their preferred format to reflect (e.g., discussions; reflection in students' mother tongue), or even refrain from grading reflection in the early stages.

Third, universities, particularly in Asia, should equip teachers with the essential skills to run reflective activities and assess their outcomes. There is a need for professional development training to prepare the teachers for this task, particularly as interviewed teachers in the present study were not aware of training opportunities. Professional development training for teachers should also highlight how examining students' reflections could contribute to teachers' development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research was funded through the General Research Fund of the Hong Kong Research Grants Council [reference number 17610215] and the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong.

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