

My Journey of Developing Academic and Digital Skills: A Reflective Essay Using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Reflective Essay



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1. Introduction

The adjustment to university life is both exciting and demanding, requiring the rapid acquisition of new academic and IT skills. In this reflective essay, I discuss my learning process of gaining these skills over the first term of study. I will employ Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) as a systematic framework to help me reflect on my experiences, allowing me to critically examine my learning activities and identify areas for continued development.

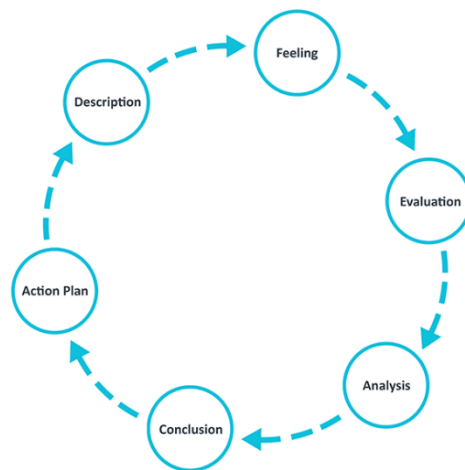


Figure 1: Gibbs Reflection Cycle (The University of Edinburgh, 2024)

Specifically, my reflection will focus on my development in academic writing, digital research and referencing, and time management using digital tools. These abilities have been crucial in meeting university requirements, handling deadlines, and generating quality academic work. Throughout this essay, I will discuss pivotal experiences that have influenced my learning, reflect on how I reacted and felt about these events, and assess the outcomes. This reflective experience has not only given me a greater awareness of myself but also some valuable insights for my future academic and professional growth.

2. Description – What happened?

As a student with previous experience in sales, marketing, and Business Administration, it was essential for me to adjust quickly to new norms, particularly in academic writing and digital literacy, upon resuming my academic studies. An

experience that stood out during my first term was the satisfaction of doing my first academic writing task for the “Academic Skills for the Digital Age” module.

First, I found it challenging to transition from my professional writing style, characterised by persuasion and conciseness, to the formal, organised, and evidence-based style of academic writing (Hyland and Jiang, 2017). It was foreign to me to understand how to analyse literature and employ Harvard referencing appropriately and critically. My initial draft was not properly cited, nor did it have critical depth.

To help overcome these issues, I participated in an academic writing workshop offered by the university’s Learning Support Department (Jusslin and Widlund, 2021). This workshop familiarised me with products like Grammarly and Turnitin for checking grammar and plagiarism and informed me on how to make the most of the digital resources provided by the university library for searching literature.

The second most important experience was learning to organise my time more effectively with the use of digital planners and calendar applications. In my career, I had used intuitive scheduling, but university work required a more formal method to juggle multiple concurrent deadlines. Having missed an early deadline on a formative assignment, I utilised Google Calendar and Trello as tools for organising my weekly study plan and tracking progress on assignments (Kamila and Marzuq, 2024).

Such experiences—struggling with the requirements of scholarly writing and adapting to online time management—were marked milestones in my skill development and influenced my adjustment to university life.

3. Feelings – What were you thinking and feeling?

As I began my first academic assignment, I was in a state of unease and confusion. Having worked in Sales and Marketing, I was accustomed to writing detailed marketing reports, and business emails — none of which had helped me develop the formal and evidence-based academic writing style. When I attempted to organise my essay and use Harvard referencing, I was faced with a sense of intimidation by the new conventions and a fear of unintentionally plagiarising.

Parallel to this, I also felt a sense of enthusiasm and interest in acquiring new skills that would contribute towards my academic and professional proficiency. The mastery of academic writing would not only pave the way for my success in university but also enhance my skills in conducting extensive research and critical thinking, which are helpful in any future business or management position (Mdobana-Zide and Mukuna, 2023).

Acquiring the use of electronic tools like Turnitin and Grammarly came with mixed feelings. I was initially hesitant about relying on computerised tools, but after noticing how they enhanced my writing clarity and helped me identify citation mistakes, I was convinced to incorporate them into my process.

Adopting digital planners and time management software also brought about an emotional shift. Having missed an early deadline, I was frustrated and disappointed, but after switching to Google Calendar and Trello, I felt more in control and organised. This emotional shift—from stress to confidence—made a significant difference in my overall motivation and learning process, and I became more self-motivated in pursuing new academic skills.

4. Evaluation – What was good and bad about the experience?

Looking back, there were several benefits. To begin with, my confidence in academic writing improved dramatically. Having spent years writing persuasively in my day job as a Sales and Marketing professional, it wasn't easy at first to shift away from that approach. Yet the university's academic writing workshop gave me some handy tips about how to frame an argument, back up a claim with evidence, and become more objective in tone (Rapanta and Macagno, 2019). This support was instrumental in helping me approach academic writing with greater clarity and purpose.

Another positive aspect was the increased awareness and practical application of digital tools. Learning how to apply Turnitin for plagiarism screening and Grammarly for grammar and style correction made me feel more assured in submitting refined work. Learning about the university library's digital databases further improved my research skills, enabling me to find reliable academic sources and strengthen my writing in the process.

Just as valuable, though, was the peer support provided. Discussing assignment requirements and learning tips with peers created an atmosphere of collective learning, which facilitated my acclimatisation to university life (Kireeti, Egitim and Thomson, 2024). Not all was positive, however. Time management was a key early struggle. While deadlines at the industry with which I was familiar were negotiable, multiple module deadlines at university needed planning. My initial missed deadline created undue stress and taught me the necessity of more effective scheduling.

I also had difficulties with the nuances of Harvard referencing and academic vocabulary. Despite the tools provided, it took time to learn when and how to paraphrase correctly. Furthermore, I found myself overly dependent on tools such as Grammarly, which sometimes led me to deviate from a complete understanding of the content. Online distractions, including social media, also impacted my concentration during study sessions.

5. Analysis – Why did it happen that way?

There were several reasons my challenges and successes had occurred. My prior professional background was a powerful determinant of them. As a writer in Sales and Marketing, my work consisted of persuasive writing and client communication, with minimal emphasis on analysis or citation. According to Zuhra (2024), professional writing tends to prioritise clarity and concision, while academic writing demands evidence-based argument and close engagement with literature—skills I had yet to master.

My early challenges with time management stemmed from the disparity between the dynamic, adaptive working environment I was accustomed to and the structured academic calendar. According to Ghafar (2023), efficient time management within the academic environment calls for planning and prioritisation—faculties that I had previously underutilised. My adoption of Google Calendar and Trello demonstrates the application of self-regulation strategies, which enabled me to have greater control over my study schedule.

Similarly, my difficulties with Harvard referencing and academic writing stemmed from inadequate exposure beforehand. Although devices such as Grammarly offered superficial enhancement, they lacked substituting the necessary in-depth command

of academic norms. The academic writing workshop exposed me to skills such as critical reading and paraphrasing, which I soon started applying more efficiently in subsequent assignments.

My digital literacy skills also changed. I was previously unfamiliar with academic databases and tended to overuse generic internet searches. Being exposed to the university's digital library resources aligns with Tham et al. (2021) model of digital capabilities, which enabled me to approach academic research in more strategic ways.

Lastly, my learning was guided by Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (1984)—by going through challenges, reflecting on them, and proactively implementing new measures—and I was able to make significant improvements in keeping up with academic requirements (Akella, 2010).

6. Conclusion – What else could you have done?

Looking back, there are several things I could have done to enhance my learning experience during the first term. One crucial option would have been to use resources earlier. As an example, I did not attend the academic writing workshop until I was experiencing problems with my initial assignment. If I had taken the initiative and participated in these workshops and library tutorials during the early part of the term, I might have developed a more solid foundation in academic writing and referencing.

Equally, although I did come to utilise tools for time management, I could have signed up for one of the time management webinars available at the beginning of the term at the university. This could have allowed me to better anticipate and plan for conflicting deadlines from the start. Another possibility I lacked was being an active member of peer study groups. While I sometimes discussed assignments with fellow students, being part of an official study group might have offered ongoing support, varied insights, and increased responsibility.

Regarding digital approaches, I now realise that overreliance on tools such as Grammarly may have hindered my more profound interaction with academic language. Instead, there is a need to balance these tools with manual corrections

and consulting style guides. In the future, I intend to be more strategic and proactive in developing both academic and digital skills.

7. Action Plan – What will you do next time? (SMART Plan) (Not included in word count)

Specific

I will participate in two advanced academic writing workshops and one session on digital research skills offered by the university in the next term.

Measurable

I will measure my progress by comparing feedback on the next two significant submissions based on the improvements made in the structure, critical analysis, referencing, and depth of research.

Achievable

These sessions and workshops are accessible through the university's learning support services and are within my current study routine, making the target attainable.

Relevant

Improved academic writing and digital research skills will directly aid my success in academic modules and also enhance my capacity to carry out evidence-based analysis—a skill highly relevant to my planned business and marketing career.

Time-bound

I will complete all the sessions and workshops and produce two improved assignments by the end of the following academic term (within the next 12 weeks).

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