

Module Name: Academic Skills in the Digital Era

Module Code: BMSW4013

Assessment 2: Reflective Essay

Student Name: Curtis Walker

Student Number: 2521766

Deadline: 27th march

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Starting university as a 25-year-old student after time away from education was a significant transition for me. Having previously focused on sport and becoming a father, I had been out of formal learning for a long time and doubted whether I would be able to adapt to academic expectations. One experience that stands out during my first term was completing my first written assignment, which required academic writing, referencing, and the use of digital tools such as the online library. This took place within my first few weeks at university and felt like a defining moment in my journey. I remember sitting at home late in the evening, trying to understand how to structure an essay and correctly reference sources using Harvard referencing, supported by guidance such as *Cite Them Right*. I also had to navigate the university's online systems to find journal articles, which was something I had never done before, and begin to understand how to use reading effectively within my writing (Godfrey, 2018). At the same time, I was balancing being a dad and managing my time between childcare, lectures, and independent study. This experience reflects Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning, as I was learning directly through doing something new and unfamiliar.

At the time, I felt completely out of my depth. I questioned whether I belonged at university at all, especially being surrounded by a range of different personalities, many of whom seemed more confident and academically prepared than me. I felt anxious, overwhelmed, and at times frustrated with myself for not understanding things quickly. There was also a sense of pressure, knowing that I had responsibilities outside of university as a father. I worried about failing and letting myself and my family down. However, alongside these negative feelings, there was also a small sense of determination. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this. Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy helps explain these feelings, as my initial lack of confidence affected how I approached the task. As I started to slowly understand how to find sources and structure my work, my belief in my own ability began to grow. This gradual development of confidence also reflects the importance of building academic skills over time (Cottrell, 2019). Submitting that first assignment was a mix of fear and pride, but it marked a shift in how I saw myself as a learner.

Looking back, there were both positive and negative aspects to this experience. On the positive side, it forced me to develop new skills quickly, particularly in academic writing and using digital platforms. I became more familiar with searching for reliable sources through the online library and began to understand the importance of referencing correctly. This experience also helped build my resilience and showed me that I could cope under pressure. An unexpected positive outcome was how much I enjoyed learning once I started to understand it. This links to Deci and Ryan's (2000) theory of motivation, as my intrinsic motivation increased once I began to feel more competent and capable. Developing these skills also supported my wider personal development as a student (Cottrell, 2021). On the negative side, I struggled significantly with time management and initially left things until the last minute because I lacked confidence and didn't know where to start. This increased my stress levels and made the process more difficult than it needed to be.

This experience happened the way it did largely because of my background, personal circumstances, and my initial mindset towards university learning. Having been out of education for a long period, I had not yet developed the academic habits or digital literacy expected in higher education. This meant that tasks such as academic writing, referencing, and using the online library felt unfamiliar and overwhelming. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory helps to explain this, as I was placed directly into a new experience without prior preparation, meaning I had to learn through trial and error. While this initially created difficulty, it was also essential for my development, as it forced me to engage actively with the learning process rather than rely on previous knowledge.

A key factor influencing this experience was my level of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) argues that individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to doubt their abilities and avoid challenging tasks. This was evident in my initial approach, as I delayed starting the assignment and lacked confidence in my ability to succeed. However, as I began to understand the requirements and engage with the task, my self-efficacy gradually improved. This demonstrates how confidence is not fixed but can develop through experience and small successes. Developing critical thinking and reflection skills (Cottrell, 2023) also supported this shift, as I became more aware of my learning

process. The shift in my mindset played a significant role in my progress, as I moved from avoidance to active engagement with my learning.

In addition to this, my responsibilities as a parent had a direct impact on how I experienced university life. Best and Foster-Cohen (2017) highlight that students who balance study with caregiving responsibilities often face increased pressure and limited time, which can affect their academic performance and stress levels. This was clearly reflected in my situation, as I had to manage childcare alongside deadlines and independent study. This made time management more challenging and contributed to my initial feelings of being overwhelmed. However, it also required me to become more organised and disciplined over time, which is an important skill for both academic and personal development.

Another important factor was my approach to time management and organisation. Covey (1989) emphasises the importance of prioritising tasks and focusing on what is important rather than what feels urgent. At the beginning of the term, I lacked this structure and often avoided tasks until they became urgent, which increased stress and reduced the quality of my work. This highlights how ineffective habits can negatively impact performance. However, through this experience, I began to recognise the importance of planning ahead and managing my time more effectively.

Motivation also played a significant role in shaping this experience. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that individuals are more motivated when they feel competent, autonomous, and supported. At the start, my lack of confidence meant I did not feel competent, which reduced my motivation and made the task feel more difficult. However, as I began to understand academic expectations and develop my skills, my sense of competence increased, which in turn improved my motivation.

Finally, reflection itself was a key factor in my development. Achor and Gielan (2019) argue that regular self-reflection can help individuals manage stress and improve performance by allowing them to recognise progress and identify areas for improvement. By reflecting on this experience, I have been able to understand not only

what went wrong but also what went well, which has helped me build confidence and develop a more positive mindset.

Overall, this experience was shaped by a combination of personal circumstances, mindset, and skill development. While the initial challenges were difficult, they were necessary for growth. The interaction between self-efficacy, motivation, time management, and reflection demonstrates that learning is not just about gaining knowledge but also about developing the skills and confidence needed to succeed.

In hindsight, there are several things I could have done differently to improve this experience. Firstly, I could have started the assignment earlier instead of delaying it due to fear and uncertainty. Secondly, I should have asked for help sooner and made better use of academic support resources. I also could have spent more time engaging with study skills guidance (Cottrell, 2019) before beginning the assignment. Additionally, I could have created a clearer plan to balance my responsibilities as a parent with my studies.

Moving forward, I will approach my academic work in a more structured and confident way. I plan to start assignments earlier and break them down into smaller, manageable tasks. I will also make better use of university resources, such as academic skills workshops and online guides, to continue developing my writing and referencing skills. Improving my time management will be a key focus, especially balancing my role as a father with my studies. This reflects Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, as I am now applying what I have learned from experience to improve future performance. Overall, this experience has shown me that although I initially felt out of my depth, I am capable of succeeding at university.

SMART Action Plan

Specific:

I will improve my academic writing, referencing, and use of digital resources by attending at least two academic skills workshops, regularly using the university's online library for research, and practising Harvard referencing in all written assignments.

Measurable:

I will track my progress by ensuring every assignment includes correctly formatted references and by aiming to improve my feedback, particularly in areas such as structure, referencing, and use of sources. I will also check my understanding by using referencing guides and comparing my work against examples.

Achievable:

I will dedicate 3–4 hours per week to focused independent study, planned around my responsibilities as a parent. I will break tasks into smaller sections to make them manageable and realistic.

Relevant:

This will support my success at university by improving the quality of my assignments, increasing my confidence in academic work, and helping me adapt fully to higher education expectations.

Time-bound:

I will achieve this by the end of the next academic term and review my progress after each assignment submission.

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