

Reflective Essay on the Development of Academic and Digital Skills

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INTRODUCTION

The transition into university life marked a significant shift in life-style and a review on how I approached the academic setting and work, especially in terms of digital and skill development. I thought I could heavily rely on previous knowledge, thinking it would be similar to riding a bike: this should be a skill that cannot be so easily forgotten. During this first module, I came face to face with numerous challenges from juggling work and school, referencing correctly to turning to digital tools. This time used has become the foundation for what I believe to be growth. Using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988), this essay explores one personal experience: my first attempt at remembering how and writing academic papers and using referencing tools. Throughout this essay I will be reflecting on the situations, my thoughts and feelings, evaluate the outcomes, analyse the causes, draw all the necessary conclusions as well as create an action plan to improve.

What happened?

During our first module, we were given two written assessments. The first focused on using AI to assist in writing and the second was about time management. I initially felt confident about the topics as they interested me and I also felt like I had very good time

management skills that I could present in the form of an academic paper, but I realized I like the referencing skills needed and the ability to present my arguments in a strong manner. I struggled with the online referencing tool "Cite Them Right" and interpreting academic sources so I decided to go with other references than the recommended ones in the module, thinking it might not be a major problem. Despite my confidence in the two subjects I had to talk about in the two assignments and the surety that I had done a good job and would receive a good grade, I scored just **27/100 and 40/100**. I was shocked as I was not able to recall ever getting such bad grades on homework ever in my life

These two low marks have highlighted major gaps in my understanding of academic expectations and understanding. My referencing was inconsistent and unreliable, my arguments were weak and more like stories, and I did not have the digital literacy needed to navigate tools like "Cite Them Right." Furthermore, I could not rely on previous knowledge as requirements have changed and the introduction of digital skills has added a second layer to writing academic papers.

What were you thinking and feeling?

When I received the assignments, I was optimistic and motivated. As I said, the two subjects were of interest to me and I was looking forward to doing my homework. Although I struggled with the source materials and with citations, I did not think that would be such a problem and went with what I felt was right rather than actually doing the proper research to create an academic paper. I constantly doubted whether I was referencing correctly and if it was actually of importance. I felt frustrated and insecure, particularly because I considered myself knowledgeable in the subjects and actually wanted to write and express my thoughts on the matters. When I submitted both papers I felt motivated and quite proud of my work.

When I saw the grades, I felt crushed, embarrassed and then angry. I had never failed like this before, and the low score hit me hard. Underneath the disappointment and anger I felt a strong sense of **motivation**. I didn't want to keep failing, I wanted this paper to be better. I knew what steps I had to take in order to improve: in writing, research, and using academic tools.

What was good and bad?

The negative aspects were around my academic skills; they clearly were not at university level. My essay structures were unclear, my referencing incomplete. My arguments were not strong enough and I also didn't seem to understand what "critical thinking" meant in an academic paper. Working by ear was not the solution.

One positive aspect of these failures was that they helped me identify what I needed to work on. I became more aware of academic expectations. For this final assessment, I retried using "Cite Them Right," and I re-read parts of *The Study Skills Handbook* by Cottrell (2019). This has helped me think more clearly about planning and structure. Despite the low grades, I still view them as steps forward and a learning process. My exposure to academic databases and digital referencing tools was something entirely new to me. This has highlighted major gaps in my academic skills. Although I had read the papers multiple times and had friends and family proofread it, I was blind-sided by my excitement in the subjects to take a step back and look at my assignments through an academic lens.

Why did it happen?

Several factors contributed to the outcome. First, I underestimated the complexity of academic writing. I assumed that being able to write well and being very vocal in the

subject would translate into writing academically, but I failed to grasp the structure and tone expected. I wrote as if I would be talking to friends, not writing an academic paper. Secondly, I lacked experience in using digital tools for academic purposes. I viewed them as optional tools to write, thinking that if I had the knowledge and interest in the subject, I would not need to reference other papers. This affected the quality of my references and my structure

If I had engaged with more of the suggested reading, such as *Critical Thinking Skills* by Cottrell (2023), could have helped me evaluate and synthesise sources more critically and have proper references and stronger arguments. The lack of understanding and patience about digital referencing tools was another issue. Although the guide “Cite Them Right” was available, I didn’t take time to fully explore its functionalities and did not consider referencing and proper citation to be important aspects of writing academic papers.

I believe that several issues have led to these low grades:

1. **Surface-level understanding** – I thought writing an essay meant giving my opinion and backing it with a few quotes. I didn’t respect the structure, integrate sources critically.
2. **Limited digital skills** – I wasn’t using digital tools, I did not find them important in the current academic setting.
3. **Lack of proper feedback** – I tried to do everything alone and relied on friends for feedback.

Looking back, I realize that these are common first-term mistakes, especially for students unfamiliar with academic writing. But they were avoidable with better preparation and support.

Conclusion

This reflective process has shown that while my assignments were a struggle, they were also a catalyst for growth. I now understand the importance of engaging actively with digital tools, properly referencing and seeking support when needed. By following the SMART action plan created below, I am confident I can enhance both my academic and digital skills in the coming module. As Cottrell (2021) suggests, academic success is built on developing a toolkit of strategies—and this experience has helped me begin building mine.

I could have done many things differently: **asked for feedback, scheduled tasks earlier, practised referencing** with real examples. I should have worked with my classmates to stay accountable.

Most importantly, I should have seen these assessments as learning opportunities, not just hurdles to pass and the opportunity for me to just word vomit on documents.

Although receiving 27/100 and 40/100 was discouraging, those failures are viewed as learning opportunities. They exposed the gaps I needed to fix and reminded me that improvement takes effort and guidance. I cannot rely simply on what I remembered from school and the fact that the subjects for assessments are of interest. By reflecting on these experiences and following a SMART plan, I feel more prepared and motivated to improve for the next projects.

As Cottrell (2021) says, academic success isn't just about intelligence—it's about learning how to learn. I've started building that skill set, and I'm determined to keep going.

SMART Action Plan

Specific:

I will do five practice referencing exercises using “Cite Them Right” and apply academic reading strategies from Cottrell’s *Critical Thinking Skills* (2023).

Measurable:

I will track my progress using a planner and note completion dates. I will try to submit at least one draft of my next assignment for feedback.

Achievable:

I have integrated these steps into my schedule and are supported by university resources. They can be added to my weekly schedule during school days.

Relevant:

Improving writing and digital referencing skills is essential for passing future assignments and gaining academic confidence. This will also help me be able to present my ideas with stronger arguments and not seem like I am telling a story.

Time-bound:

I will complete all mentioned actions throughout the next weeks after setting myself weekly goals; this will help me have a more structured week and build consistent hobbies.

References

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