

## The reflective writing continuum: Re-conceptualizing Hatton & Smith's types of reflective writing

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### *Abstract*

This paper presents the Reflective Writing Continuum (RWC), which is a reconceptualization of Hatton and Smith's (1995) reflective writing framework. The RWC is developed from the evaluation of 125 eJournals made by 25 distance education learners in the University of the Philippines – Open University's (UPOU) undergraduate education studies and teacher preparation programs. The eJournals were analyzed using collaborative content analysis that initially utilized Hatton and Smith's Types of Reflective Writing. However, the attempts to apply the definitions and categorizations of the typology in the analysis of the reflective writings have indicated a need for some reconceptualization of Hatton & Smith's reflective writing framework. To make the classification more specific, a spectrum of subcategories of reflective writing types was created. This led to the development of the RWC. With its detailed descriptions and categories, the RWC provides educators and learners a new framework to evaluate and improve reflective outputs.

**Keywords:** reflection; reflective writing; reflective writing framework; reflective learning; teacher education

## **The reflective writing continuum: Re-conceptualizing Hatton & Smith's types of reflective writing**

### **1. Introduction**

Over the years, since Dewey's (1910) and Schon's (1983) seminal work on reflection and reflective practice, reflection has been widely used in education to foster learning and prepare pre-service teachers for reflective practice, and for teacher professional development, due to the many benefits it is posited to bring (Çimer, Çimer, & Vekli, 2013). However, the lack of clarity of the concept and definition of reflection (Al Riyami, 2015; Collin, Karsenti, & Komis, 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Kinsella, 2003; Korthagen, 2001; Mackintosh, 1998; Rodgers; 2002) remains a contentious issue on the practice of reflection.

This paper, therefore, intends to present a framework for understanding and evaluating reflective writings, the Reflective Writing Continuum (RWC), which expands Hatton & Smith's (1995) Types of Reflective Writing. This new framework was developed during the conduct of a study that aimed to evaluate the levels of reflection exhibited in the reflective weblogs or eJournals of distance education (DE) learners. Furthermore, I provide in this paper an overview on reflection, i.e., its benefits, definitions, and issues, first; then introduce Hatton & Smith's Types of Reflective Writing. Subsequently, I discuss the methods and events that led to the development of the RWC, which is followed by the presentation of the categories and subcategories of reflective writing that compose the RWC. The last part of the paper provides the concluding discussion and recommendations for further research.

### **2. Background**

In recent years, the use of reflection to promote meaningful learning has found increasing support from educators and gained a foothold in teacher education. A mass of literature has presented claims of the positive effects of reflection on learning associated with various processes, such as self-awareness and metacognition, active engagement, deep-processing and high-order thinking, and meaning-making, which in turn, are expected to develop affective and lifelong learning, and skills like problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking (e.g., Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999; Boyd, Dooley, & Felton, 2006; Çimer, Çimer, & Vekli, 2013; Estrada & Rahman, 2014; Farrah, 2012; Hinett, 2002; Hume, 2009; Kurt, 2007; Loughran, 2002; McGuire, Lay, & Peters, 2009; Moon, 2004, 2006; Park, 2003). Importantly, reflection has been posited to help students bridge the gap between theory and practice, integrate abstract concepts with concrete situations and experiences, and facilitate transfer of skills and knowledge from school to their professions (Bain et al, 1999; Boud, 2001; Çimer, Çimer, & Vekli, 2013; Loughran, 2002). In the field of education, for example, Lee (2008) argued that "it is only when [teacher candidates] reflect upon their knowledge critically that they can transfer what they have learned in initial teacher preparation programs as students to the real classroom situations as teachers" (p. 117). McAlpine and Weston (2000) further explained that reflection enables teachers to expand their knowledge as they purposefully convert experiential knowledge to tacit knowledge by establishing connections between experiences and future practices, and by reconstructing knowledge and understanding. Hence, through reflection, individuals can make improvements in their behaviors and actions (Ghaye, 2011), and pre-service teachers can develop a broader, more elaborate, and realistic conceptions of teaching and learning practices (Lee, 2008).

Journal writing is among the various teaching strategies employed in the educational setting to encourage learners to reflect. It serves as a vehicle for the cognitive processes of reflection to become concrete and explicit. As learners represent their reflection via a medium, such as writing, they can gain further learning from the process of framing and reframing their thoughts in various ways (Moon, 2004). Furthermore, engaging in reflective writing activities provides learning conditions for students to establish connections between the concepts that they learn and practical situations (McGuire, Lay, & Peters, 2009), and make sense of their

experiences (Boud, 2001). Lee asserted that putting thoughts into writing allows students to gain deeper understanding of issues tackled in their courses and facilitates the development of their professional identities as future educators. By way of reflective or journal writing, "learning became more real and personal" as learners are being "prompted... to rethink the issues covered in class, express their views, and ask questions" (Lee, 2008, p. 132).

### *2.1 Definition of Reflection*

Reflection, in everyday language, is simply "a form of thinking" applied to relatively "complicated, ill-structured ideas", a process of building up what is already known towards an outcome that may be either anticipated or unexpected (Moon, 2004, 2006). This section presents a brief review of the seminal ideas that have contributed to more refined theoretical conceptions of reflection.

Dewey viewed reflection as "a specialized form of thinking... that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious thought" (as cited in Moon, 2001, p. 2), which originates from the need to resolve uncertainty, bewilderment or a perceived dissonance about an experience (as cited in Finlay, 2008). It is an "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it tends...It includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality" (Dewey, 1910, p. 6; Dewey, 1933, p. 9; as cited in Moon, 2001, p. 2). Rodgers (2002) derived from Dewey's works four criteria that constitute reflection:

- Reflection is a meaning-making process towards a deeper understanding of relations among experiences and ideas.
- Reflection involves rigorous thinking.
- Reflection acquires meaning when expressed in a collaborative context.
- Reflection values the affective aspect of personal and intellectual growth for self and others.

Kolb shared Dewey's view that reflection evolves from people's attempt to resolve inconsistencies between their current understanding and new experience. Reflection stems from experience, driven by the tensions that arise from inconsistencies between experience and current understandings (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In both definitions, reflection is a highly cognitive process that entails analysis, evaluation, and problem solving.

On the other hand, Nguyen, Fernandez, Karsenti, and Charlin (2014) defined reflection "as the process of engaging the self in attentive, critical, exploratory and iterative interactions with one's thoughts and actions, and their underlying conceptual frame, with a view to changing them and a view on the change itself" (p. 1176); while for Sandars (2009), "reflection is a metacognitive process... with the purpose of developing greater understanding of both the self and the situation" to inform future experiences (p. 685). In Nguyen, et al.'s and Sandars' definitions of reflection, the significant role of the self in the reflective process, wherein it is inferred as a personal endeavor to analyze and comprehend one's self and experiences in order to make changes and guide future actions, is highlighted.

Though the foregoing definitions similarly impress that reflection is a form of mental or cognitive activity, the varied definitions and differences in emphasis also manifest the absence of a consolidated definition of reflection.

### *2.2 Hatton and Smith's Types of Reflective Writing*

Over the years, several models of reflection were developed to explain reflective processes, such as Schon's (1983) seminal work, *Reflection in and on Practice*; Kolb's *Experiential Learning Cycle* (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009), Gibb's *Reflective Cycle* (as cited in Finlay, 2008), Genor's (2005) *Framework for Reflection*, and

Surbeck, Han, and Moyer's (1991) categories of reflection. The model proposed by Hatton and Smith has become prominent in reflective writing research that goes beyond the teacher education field for which it was originally formulated (Moon, 2006). In Hatton and Smith's aim to operationalize the definition of reflection, which they argued as loosely used, and to encourage its practice, they were able to identify different kinds of reflection in the reflective outputs of teacher education students; thus, forming the Types of Reflective Writing framework. According to this model, there are four types of writing reflections - *descriptive writing*, *descriptive reflection*, *dialogic reflection*, and *critical reflection*. Descriptive writing is essentially not reflective since it is no more than a basic description. Descriptive reflection, on the other hand, represents a higher level of reflection. Although it still descriptive, providing reasons for experiences becomes apparent in this type of writing. While, in the dialogic reflection level, reflection is more analytical as it considers several alternative explanations, perspectives, or judgments. At the peak of reflective writing is critical reflection, wherein reflections of multiple perspectives are situated in the context of historical and socio-political influences. This model has been used and adapted to analyze and identify types of reflective writing (e.g., Dos & Demir, 2013; Estrada & Rahman, 2014; Kocoglu, Akyel, & Ercetin, 2008; Lyngsnes, 2012; Marcolino & Mizukami, 2008; Ming & Manaf, 2014; Prestridge, 2014).

### *2.3 Concerns and Issues with Reflection and Reflective Writing*

While educators endorse reflection as a desirable activity for learners and teachers alike, its practical promotion in the school setting has been faced with difficulties. In Cohen-Sayag and Fischl's (2012) study, production of deeper reflective writing did not consequently improve the teaching practices of prospective teachers, except for those who reached critical level of reflection. It seems that Gustafson and Bennet (1999) were accurate in their assertion that the understanding of reflection and on how to harness it is quite limited. Similarly, Korthagen (2001) contended that there is an absence of a consensus on the definition of reflection due to the differing perspectives on what is essential to education. Russell (2013) made a similar assertion that "virtually every article about reflective practice seems to be driven by its author's personal perspective" (p. 80).

With the lack of unified definition and framework for its application, as well as, the insufficient evidence of its lasting positive effect, Mackintosh (1998) argued that reflection is a defective academic strategy (as cited in Moon, 2004). Al Riyami (2015) also contended in his paper that the vague meaning of reflection with its various definitions and interpretations in the literature is a factor to the weakness of using reflection for teacher professional development. Likewise, Rodgers (2002) raised four key issues that arise from the loss of clear definition of reflection: 1) difficulty in differentiating reflection from other forms of thought processes, 2) issues with the assessment of reflective skills, 3) absence of common understanding and language that would facilitate conversation about reflection and its practice, and 4) challenge of studying the impact of reflective practice on teacher education and professional development. Collin, Karsenti, and Komis (2013) corroborated these assertions in their article. They concluded that the lack of consensus on the concept and terminology for reflective practice results to the difficulty in operationalizing its methodology and, consequently, its evaluation, which subsequently, obstructs empirical research.

All the above studies convey that the lack of singular understanding or an ambiguous definition of reflection impedes its effectual application and hampers its effectiveness as a learning and professional development tool. Although reflection or reflective practice is not without criticisms, we should not disregard the advantages of reflection in learning and development. In this regard, the establishment of a clearer understanding of reflection is important to foster depth and effective practice, and henceforth, create a substantial educational impact (Brookfield, 1995; Moon, 2004). Thus, a systematic and careful examination of the levels of reflection that learners actually achieve is pertinent in order to improve and further develop effective reflective practices.

This study emerged from efforts to evaluate and understand the reflective writings of students in a DE setting. However, as I progressed, I noted the lack of clear and unified definition, a gap in the study of reflection, that the literature expressed, and the need for distinctive classification of types of reflective writing.

Consequently, the research evolved into creating a new framework to address the issues encountered in the analysis of students' reflective work; thus, producing the RWC.

The RWC, with its specific definitions and categories, can serve as a tool for evaluating written reflective outputs of both teachers and students alike. Furthermore, learners, pre-service teachers, and education practitioners, who engage in reflection and reflective practice, can use the RWC as a guide during reflective writing activities.

### 3. Methodology

The RWC was constructed in a study that examined the levels of reflection of DE learners as manifested in their eJournals. In this study, I employed a qualitative research design, wherein I utilized both deductive and inductive content analysis methods (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) via a collaborative coding approach (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Saldaña, 2016). In deductive content analysis, the categories or framework for analysis is based on an established theory. On the other hand, in inductive content analysis, categories, themes, or models are derived from the analysis of the data itself (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Thomas, 2006), which is essentially a technique used in grounded theory (Bowen, 2006), a qualitative research method of discovering theory from a body of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

For the deductive aspect of the research, I adopted Hatton and Smith's Types of Reflective Writing as the theoretical basis of the coding scheme. While, in the inductive content analysis, an expert in educational psychology, and I took note of emerging themes from the data, which we subsequently clustered and used to aid the subsequent rounds of the content analysis. The common themes that surfaced during the coding process became the foundation for the formulation of subcategories that led to the development of the RWC.

Twenty-five education students of the University of the Philippines – Open University (UPOU) produced the eJournals that I analyzed in the study. To select the participants of the research, I employed random sampling of the students that completed the Philosophy of Education course and the Instructional Media Resources course. As part of the requirements in these courses, the students wrote an eJournal entry after every course module to reflect on their learning and performance in the course. Below are some of the guide questions or prompts provided for the students' structured and semi-structured reflection:

- Why should educational philosophy be important to you? How can understanding educational philosophies benefit you, as a future educator?
- How does the Idealist philosophy impact your life and education? Share experiences that show the influence of Idealism in your life. How is Idealism evident in Philippine education or the education in your community? Cite concrete examples of how Idealism affects education in the Philippines or in your locality.
- Write about what you have learned and realized from the lesson we had. What insights can you share with us about the topics tackled? What perspectives have been changed or improved?
- How was your learning experience this past week? Did you have fun doing your own projected visual and audio materials? Were you able to apply the concepts and principles in designing these instructional materials? What difficulties did you encounter in preparing and developing your instructional materials? In your opinion, will your materials be fully maximized with the learning/instructional plan you developed? What else do you think you need to improve on in designing, developing, and integrating projected and audio materials in your instruction?
- Propose alternative explanations, perspectives, solutions, or methods.
- Develop plans for solving a problem, procedures to arrive at a solution, or steps in creating a product.

After the participants gave their consent to the use of their eJournal for the study, I assigned each of them a code to maintain their anonymity during the content analysis. Five randomly selected entries from the eJournals of the 25 participants, for a total of 125 eJournals, comprised the data.

The coding unit assigned for the content analysis consisted of whole paragraphs to preserve the context of the reflective writing during the coding process. The content analysis involved four rounds of independent coding to determine the types of reflective writing exhibited in the eJournals, while also noting emergent themes. The second coder and I performed multiple rounds of independent coding to ensure the reliability of the categorization of the students' reflective writing. During this process, we analyzed the eJournal entries and categorized the coding units independently to avoid influencing each other's evaluation. During the content analysis, we determined the levels of reflective writings that the paragraphs in each eJournal entry manifest using Hatton and Smith's typology. The process of identifying the level of students' reflective writing involved comparing of the characteristics of each paragraph in the entry to Hatton and Smith's descriptions of the reflective writing types. While analyzing the paragraphs, we also noted the themes that the paragraphs revealed. By using the paragraph level of analysis, we attempted to discern the intention of the narrative or statements in the paragraphs, which aid in the categorization of the reflective writing and the uncovering of emergent themes.

After every round of independent coding, we compared and combined the results and conducted collaborative discussions of the coding results, observations, themes noted, and points of conflict followed. The independent coding approach is among the consistency methods used to ensure trustworthiness of qualitative research (Thomas, 2006). On the other hand, the collaborative approach to coding allows for richer interpretations and analysis through the dynamic exchange of insights and rigorous discussions (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, to check the reliability of the coding process, I computed for inter-rater reliability using Freelon's (2013) online reliability calculator, ReCal (<http://dfreelon.org/utis/recalfront/>), at the end of the fourth round of content analysis. The progressive revisions, which I based on the outcomes and collaborative discussions that followed each round of content analysis, served as the groundwork for the construction of the RWC framework.

#### **4. Development of the RWC**

Two key challenges – the confusion in the classification of the types of reflective writing and on what constitutes reflective writing – emerged during the content analysis of the data, which affirmed the need for the reconstitution of the definition of reflection and the creation of a framework that explicitly presents the distinctions of each type of reflection. This brought forth the reconceptualization of Hatton and Smith's model to form the RWC.

##### *4.1 Refining the Defining Features of Types of Reflection*

The difficulty in classifying the reflective writings with certainty, which yielded highly inconsistent results, is one of the challenges that the second coder and I encountered in the first round of independent coding. On many occasions, we could not confidently decide whether we should categorize an entry as one type or another, such as in PH8's entry, in which we could not agree whether to classify it as descriptive writing or descriptive reflection. The excerpt shows PH8's description of her observations, which is characteristic of descriptive writing; but also presents some of her explanations for them, which is an attribute of descriptive reflection.

*In our community, we have four types of preparatory school; catholic school, Christian school and two secular schools. Despite variations they have common ground; children are taught to develop good characters on top of the basics of reading, writing and art. Kids ages 1 to 3, who are spoiled by parents at home was transformed into a good and controlled mannered kids after entering preparatory school. Idealism is still very relevant today; it nourishes both intellectual and spiritual side of every person. (PH8, entry 2, para 4)*

It became apparent that the types of reflection as described in Hatton and Smith's reflective model needed

clarification. Thus, I, in collaboration with the second coder, identified and clarified the specific characteristics of the types of reflective writings based on the initial themes that surfaced from our analysis of the eJournal entries. From this, I revised the coding framework for use in the next round of coding.

#### 4.2 Towards a Clearer Definition of Reflection

Despite the clarifications made on the types of reflective writing and the additional descriptions incorporated in the coding framework, several disagreements persisted in the second round of coding. We were able to attribute this to the apparent ambiguity in our personal conceptions of reflection, which is reflective of the commonsense view (Moon, 2001, 2004, 2006) that fails to distinguish reflection and thinking.

Further, while Hatton and Smith associated providing reasons for events with reflective writing, we disagreed whether some explanations were in fact reflective or were merely a form of higher order thinking, such as in the entry of SB9.

*Though multimedia can be a great tool for the teaching and learning process both teachers and students should not leave the technology in charge to facilitate the process. Students still yearn for teacher's assistance, confirmation, approval and praise which multimedia can somehow provide but not as better, genuine and warmth as the instructors can give. Multimedia assists the teachers to provide a meaningful learning experience to the students. It is now the instructors' duty to let the media serve its real purpose. (SB9, entry 7, para 4)*

Consonant with reports from the literature, a clearer definition of reflection is needed (Al Riyami, 2015; Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012; Mackintosh, 1998; Moon, 2004; Nguyen et al., 2014; Rodgers, 2002). I surmised that the stress on cognitive processes common in literature, with little emphasis on the integration of one's self and feelings in the writing, is where the confusion stems from. As previously mentioned, the lack of a definitive definition of reflection causes ambiguity in distinguishing reflection from other forms of thinking (Rodgers, 2002). Furthermore, the cognitive processes that are usually used interchangeably with reflection, such as evaluation, contemplation, and pondering, do not adequately capture the practice and process of reflection (Cropley & Hanton, as cited in Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012).

Hence, in keeping with Nguyen et al.'s (2014) and Sandars' (2009) definitions, I also underscored the incorporation of the self, as well as, the inclusion of the processing of emotions and the exploration of reasons for situations in a refined definition of reflection:

*Reflection is a process of engaging one's self in metacognition and self-examination, wherein one is purposefully exploring his/her thoughts, feelings, actions, processes, experiences, and circumstances, as well as their underlying rationale.*

From this definition, a text, to be considered reflective, should show personal connection; otherwise, it is, basically, an academic writing. I emphasize the element of the "self" as that which separates reflection from other thought processes (i.e., analysis and evaluation). As Vos and Cowan (2009) asserted, "Thinking is not always reflective." Moon (2004) also conveyed that reflection, which shows depth, involves the "first person" as the learners incorporate themselves (i.e., their roles and processes) in the reflection. Correspondingly, Elliott-John's (2014) guiding framework for reflective writing, explicitly specifies the use of an "I" perspective in writing reflection.

In this regard, though the focus of a reflective writing may be the consideration of other people, perspectives, contexts, or wider social systems, it has to manifest the active involvement and the immersion of the writer in the processing of such thoughts and insights, as opposed to the writer being a distant and dispassionate observer. For example, SF13's entry centers not on his direct experiences but on issues in teachers' technology integration, yet it shows his engagement in the contemplation of these educational concerns.

*But how can the teacher who has not been exposed to the emerging technologies be knowledgeable when resources are not even enough to procure them? And if there is a remote possibility of acquiring them, are the teachers ready to use them for teaching or they themselves need to learn how to use these technologies to begin with? Such are my questions as I ponder on how technology can go alongside content and pedagogy in the present classroom context especially in the Philippine setting where even a blackboard is shared between simultaneous classes. I suppose, this is one interesting topic for further discussion in another entry. (SF13, entry 2, para 3)*

#### 4.3 Formulation of Subcategories and New Terminologies

When the aforementioned main issues were resolved, I focused on the analysis of the emergent themes from the data, which underpinned the construction of the subcategories of the types of reflective writing. We incorporated these subcategories in the succeeding rounds of the independent coding, which yielded high inter-rater reliability, with a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.93.

The emergence of the subcategories and the realization that they alluded to a subtle progression of reflective writing along a continuum prompted the formulation of fresh terminologies for the types of reflective writing and their corresponding subcategories, and the reorganization of these subcategories to form a new model, which I titled Reflective Writing Continuum. There are four major types of reflective writing in the RWC: *description, explanation, exploration, expansion* (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*The Major Types of Reflective Writing*

Major Types	Characterizing features	Example
Description	definitions; facts; summaries; narratives; discussions	Basically, in this module, we learned about the four general philosophies which are Idealism, Realism, Existentialism, and Pragmatism. We defined each of the philosophies and discussed them based on metaphysics, epistemology and axiology. We also tackled the implications of each of them on education, how they influence teaching methods and curriculum, views on learning, and the role of teachers and students. (SA1, entry 3, para 2)
Explanation	description of experience, thoughts, or feelings with some explanations; generalization based on own judgment	According to my Biology teacher in high school, “The only permanent thing in this world is the word change.” As I started browsing articles related with TPACK and Industrial [sic] Design, I was a little bit anxious of what these things have something to offer. This is again new to me. Oh, another complex topics to read on. Suddenly, that statement of my teacher struck me in an instant. Well, I need to adapt change. What’s the sense of doing all these and that if I wouldn’t allow myself to embrace new things? With an amount of diligence of learning TPACK and ID by reading again and again, I would say that they’re worthy to be dealt with. (PA8, entry entry 2, para 1)
Exploration	discourse with oneself; mulling over reasons and exploring alternatives; critique of experiences; self-dialogue	With just a little experience in teaching, I conclude that it is a collaborative process between a teacher and a student. I just cannot impose what I know is best for them. At the start of the school year, I do have a structured curriculum in line with the goals of the educational institution. But, as the days pass by, it is important that I get to know my students, their strengths and weaknesses. From there, I should put into effect different techniques in accordance to their needs from these philosophies for better learning outcomes. (SG7, entry 2, para 5)
Expansion	pondering on broader system; call to action	Sadly, I cannot recall any lesson or even just a simple discussion about such primal questions during my primary and secondary education. I believe that this philosophical view were not apparent during those times because of the overwhelming influence of capitalism and consumerism. The advent of industrial growth brought with it the philosophy of conformity that reflected even unto basic education. (PF6, entry 8, para 2)



## **5. The Major Categories of the RWC**

### *5.1 Description type*

The first type of reflective writing is description. Similar to Hatton and Smith's descriptive writing, it is non-reflective since it only presents information or discusses concepts or ideas without meaning-making nor musings on one's thoughts or opinions, as the example in Table 1 shows. The lack of personal integration and contemplation on own insights relegated this type of writing as non-reflective.

I noted that as much as 38% of the students' eJournal entries include the descriptive type of writing. Dos and Demir (2013), and Lyngsnes (2012) similarly reported that several of the students' reflective outputs in their separate studies manifested descriptive writing. It is apparent that when students are assigned to produce reflective writing, their outputs include description type of reflective writing. As such, I retained the descriptive form of writing in the framework as it merits acknowledgment considering that such type of reflective writing may provide the foundation for further reflection (Moon, 2004; Moon, 2006) and may serve as an initial level for the higher forms of reflective writing as one further engages in reflection through journal writing (Lee, 2008).

### *5.2 Explanation type*

The explanation type of reflection is the inception of the reflective part of the continuum, where there is a clear attempt to provide explanations and justifications for one's thoughts, feelings, actions, and experiences using personal viewpoint. Cohen-Sayag and Fischl, and Lee also indicated that providing explanations is a feature of descriptive reflection. Among the four levels of reflective writing, explanation is the most exhibited (43%) in the eJournals of the participants, consistent with the findings of Hatton and Smith, and Dos and Demir in their own studies.

### *5.3 Exploration type*

The exploration type of reflective writing manifests contemplation of alternative viewpoints to explain causation, self-critique, hypothesize, provide generalizations, or propose recommendations. Compared to explanation, it is more expansive as it explores multiple perspectives to explain circumstances and experiences, and attempts to view situations through alternate lenses. Students extend their thinking from the self towards the consideration of other people or contexts. The learner, in this case, goes beyond one's personal opinions and considers other perspectives that may come from literature, theories, from other people, and/or other frames of reference. This level of reflective writing is analogous to Jay and Johnson's (2002) comparative reflection, which explores alternative views on an event.

### *5.4 Expansion type*

In the expansion type, learners discuss the social-political dimensions of situations; they extend their contemplation to include social factors and influences that underpin events or circumstances and explore social ramifications. Such reflective writing may also manifest transformative qualities as it explores various social issues and ways to address or resolve them. In this type of reflective writing, the students associate experiences and situations to the social factors that may underpin them, and connect themselves with others, their communities, and society.

## **6. The Subcategories of Reflective Writing**

The development of the continuum of subcategories is the key departure of this framework from Hatton and Smith's model (see Table 2).

**Table 2***The Subcategories of Reflective Writing*

Major Types	Subcategories	Characterizing features
Description	Definition	definition of terms; statement of facts; summary of concepts
	Narration	narration of experiences/report of events
	Commentary	statement/exposition/discussion of concepts or opinions
Explanation	Explained Experience	description of experience with some explanations
	Explained Response	expression of feelings, wants, or opinions with some explanations
	Perceptual Interpretation	explanation for experiences or decisions
	Perceptual Justification	explanation of generalization based on own judgment
Exploration	Alternative Reason	discourse with oneself, mulling over reasons and exploring alternatives (which may come from his/her own perspective or from others)
	Critique	self-critique or critique of experiences which may be based on learning from text or resources or alternate perspectives (includes comparing and contrasting or cause-and-effect reasoning but exploratory)
	Hypothesis	deliberation of the sides/perspectives/conditions of others in relation to one's experiences, perspectives, or learning with exploration of possible reasons or offering hypothesis
	Generalization	generalization from the rumination of multiple perspectives or other factors/reasoning at the level of self-dialogue
	Beginning Social Connection	discourse that partially link experiences/situation to broader system but the main focus of discussion is still the consideration of other perspectives or other people involved
Expansion	Social Discourse	discourse on the social system or forces that underpins experiences or situations
	Transformation	call to action for social reformation or transformation

### 6.1 Subcategories of Description

The description level of the RWC has three subtypes – *definition*, *narration*, and *commentary*.

**Definition subcategory** - The definition subcategory consists of definitions of terms, statements of facts, or summaries of concepts. There are no attempts to provide personal interpretations and connections to these concepts, for example:

*[“]Education in the largest sense is any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of an individual. In its technical sense, education is the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another.[”]* (SE5, entry 2, para 5)

Likewise, the reflective blogs of the participants in Dos and Demir’s research include definition of terms. The surfacing of such theme in reflective writings could mean that as students make meaning and reflect on their learning, they need to recall definitions for terms they encounter in their studies.

**Narration subcategory** - The second subcategory, narration, describes personal experiences or reports events. However, a rumination on the reasons or explanations for these experiences and events are absent, as exhibited by the example below; hence, classified under description.

*Just this week, I had the chance to ask my elder sister who teaches in elementary grade about the importance of instructional media. She simply said that if these media are absent, teaching-learning scenario would turn out unproductive. According to her, just a simple picture*

*on the board to be shown to the students can change the atmosphere in the classroom. She even added that, they make teaching convenient and less taxing. (PA9, entry 1, para 2)*

**Commentary subcategory** - The last subcategory in the description type of reflective writing is commentary. This contains statement of opinions, discussion of concepts, or exposition of insights, which is evident in the example below. This subcategory may also present an analysis of situations or concepts.

*As mentioned, there are many gadgets, apps and online tools that can help both the teachers and students. I think, emails and cellphones has come in handy in any class set up, whether it's an actual classroom or a virtual classroom. You can easily communicate with your teacher and classmates with an email or cellphones. Google is one of the many technology companies that have a variety of apps and services that can benefit both student and teachers for school related activities. They have Gmail which is an email service. They have Google Drive it is a file storage software that allows its users to store, share and edit documents. This can help both teacher and the student when comes to paper works and submitting projects or assignments. Youtube can also be platform that teacher can use. Teachers can record their lectures and have them uploaded on Youtube. (SC10, entry 1, para 2)*

Although this subcategory may discuss opinions and exhibit analytical thinking, it is still non-reflective since it lacks personal integration nor scrutiny of one's own thinking and examination of reasons for beliefs. In some cases, it may be an analytical or an expository essay, but not a reflective writing. Hence, a writing that manifests high order thinking is not necessarily reflective. As emphasized previously, a written work should have a discourse on a personal level, an integration of the self, for it to be a reflective output. Thus, the actual entry level of reflective writing is explanation.

## 6.2 Subcategories of Explanation

The explanation type is composed of four sub-classifications – *explained experience*, *explained response*, *perceptual interpretation*, and *perceptual justification*.

**Explained experience subcategory** - The explained experience subcategory is the transition level from the non-reflective writing to the reflective. This has similar features to the narration subcategory, but differs in that it attempts to provide some reasons for experiences, such as shown in the PC11' eJournal excerpt.

*I have always been a fan of print materials as a primary source of instruction. Ever since I was in grade school, I learn things from reading. I am more of a verbal-visual learner than a verbal-auditory learner. This means that I'd rather READ words than listen to them. Honestly, I have a short-attention span when listening to lectures. After 30 minutes of listening to the speaker, my mind would wander somewhere, or I'll end up doodling on my notebook. I would always tell myself that whatever the speaker/teacher is saying, I can read about it in the textbook, the handout, or even my classmates' notes. The exceptions to my short-attention span are when the speaker/teacher distributed handouts that I read along with his/her speech, and/or an interesting Powerpoint Presentation. (PC11, entry 4, para 1)*

In the example, PC11 describes her classroom experiences and provides simple explanations for them. Thus, this type of reflective writing has already transitioned from the description to the explanation type of reflective writing.

**Explained response subcategory** - The second subcategory of explanation is explained response. In this form of writing, the learner conveys and superficially explains one's feelings, desires, and opinions, just as how SA8 expresses her strong feelings about what she believes as dependence on PowerPoint.

*But really, I find it ridiculous that we have become slaves of this whole powerpoint thing,*

*because I'd like to believe that the teacher carries the lesson, not the powerpoint. So, even without the powerpoint presentation, a teacher should always be able to teach his student, deliver the lesson for the day because it's something he knows. As if this isn't enough, there are also teachers who, perhaps because they think it's quite convenient, like to put everything – as in everything they're going to say – in their presentations. He/she might as well have copied the book and read it out to the class loud... (SA8, entry 4, para 2)*

**Perceptual interpretation subcategory** - With regard to the perceptual interpretation subcategory, learners interpret their experiences using their own reasoning. Though both explained experience and perceptual interpretation involve personal experiences, there is more elaboration on the reasons for experiences in perceptual interpretation than in explained experience. In the example below, the learner defends her interpretation of her experiences.

*I believe that 60% of my education was based on Idealism. I was in a Catholic School since pre-school and I think Catholic school practices Idealism. They strive to develop the moral and spiritual values and encourage the students to be closer to our Creator. They also focus on history and teach its relevance to the present and future. They encourage students to think and share their ideas. Catholic schools seem to be very structured at some point however there will always be teachers opening the mind of the students to reality. Although I think the structured part stucked [sic] to me when I was younger so when I had to face reality I had a hard time. . Being a single mother to 2 boys, I have gone through a lot. My moral and spiritual values that have been strengthened through my education has helped me cope and encourage me not to give up. (PC3, entry 2, para 1)*

**Perceptual justification subcategory** - Perceptual justification, on the other hand, is the last subcategory in the explanation type of reflective writing. This includes learners' perceived generalizations on or personal realizations from situations or experiences, along with their explanations for them. An excerpt of SB9's eJournal entry is representative of this subcategory. In the passage below, the learner discusses her realizations on the significance of knowing how to locate and evaluate reliable instructional resources.

*As a future instructor being able to know where to get proper and accurate resources matters in order to guide students especially when it is coming from the internet, because it will be carried and applied by the learners maybe not only in the confines of the room but when they go out and create their own lives. This module enlightened me on how to use properly a tool which I have been using for the longest time of my life. Now I am equipped of determining which one would be a good resource for me and my future student. This way, I can also guide them so that they will not be misled by a powerful tool that is playing a significant part in our lives. (SB9, entry 6, para 2)*

The four subcategories discussed present explanations based on the personal perspectives of the learner, which, according to Lyngsnes (2012) may sometimes be pupil-oriented rather than from the vantage point of an educator; hence, may be limited in scope, diversity, and breadth. The sample reflective writing of participants PC11 and PC3 may show a semblance of pupil-oriented viewpoint, wherein, to some extent, the learners explain their experiences based on their perspective as a student.

### 6.3 Subcategories of Exploration

There are five subcategories in the exploration type of reflective writing – *alternative reason, critique, hypothesis, generalization, and beginning social connection.*

**Alternative reason subcategory** - The alternative reason subcategory is the beginning phase of exploration, whereby learners contemplate on their thoughts, attempt to explore other probable explanation/s for

events/experiences, and/or view situations using other lenses. It is a discourse with oneself as one thinks about alternative reasons, which may come from his/her own perspective or from others. It may involve self-questioning or include phrases, such as "I wonder...", "Maybe...", or "Perhaps...". An excerpt of SF6's eJournal entry shows this type of reflective writing as she reconsiders and rethinks Existentialist education, though she may be an advocate of student-centered teaching.

*The first two are teacher-centered while the other two are student-centered; Existentialism joins the latter two in that aspect. I know that I claimed to have a bias for student centered education but I reserve some skepticism for the purely Existentialist form of education. Students decide almost everything from their curriculum to the pace in which they tackle that curriculum. It's very nice to imagine such a life but very few people can afford that. There are demands for these students to eventually contribute to society and I'm not sure if the education's value of responsibility is enough to handle that. Seeking to develop ones individuality and answering ones responsibilities are two arguably contrasting. See, responsibilities are often from outside pressures (get a job!) and getting ruled by that makes it hard to focus on ones individuality... there's no clear balance. (SF6, entry 5, para 6)*

**Critique subcategory** - The next subcategory, critique, is an analysis of one's own thoughts, emotions, actions, and/or processes based on the consideration of other perspectives or frames of thought. This reflective writing may include comparing and contrasting, and/or cause-and-effect reasoning. The excerpt of PF14's entry exemplifies this type of writing as the participant critiques the learning activity she developed from the perspective of her students.

*I believe this design will encourage children to participate actively because they will feel like they are given the liberty to choose as opposed to being required to pay attention and to listen. Although this activity alone should not be the only medium or instance that the class should be exposed about the topic of global warming, the inquiry can be further extended according to what questions the children might ask and might be interested to investigate after the "exhibit." In a way, this activity will be a provocation for the children to think more about climate change and hopefully will encourage them to pull out some more threads of ideas or concepts they might come up with because of the activity. (PF14, entry 8, para 3)*

**Hypothesis subcategory** - The hypothesis subcategory, from the term itself, presents the learners' hypotheses or suppositions, which they anchor on the analysis of situations and on the exploration of various factors or viewpoints. This reflective writing may incorporate "if... then" statements or phrases that may imply hypothesizing. SC3's entry exhibits such type of reflective writing wherein she presupposed that detrimental effects would result if she did not address her weaknesses.

*Luckily, we were asked to evaluate ourselves as learners. In this case, it will help me determine my weakest and strongest points as a learner. Before taking the test, I knew that I have a problem with time management but I didn't know that it was so bad that I need to put more attention to it especially that I know that it plays a big part for my becoming a good distance learner. I scored above 55 which is equivalent to poor time manager and I know that if I take the results for granted, it will lead to serious problems not only on my studies but also in my everyday life. Even the results in the Study Skills Inventory show the same with regards [sic] to my time management. (SC3, entry 1, para 2)*

**Generalization subcategory** - Generalization is the penultimate subcategory of exploration. In this subtype of reflective writing, the learner provides generalizations or offers recommendations founded on the exploration of multiple perspectives, variables, or learning, and on the consideration of factors and influences other than the self. In this subcategory, the individual may also start to see himself/herself as a part of a community; hence, may use words such as, "we" and "us". PB10's writing manifests this as he urges teachers to be innovative and

to employ varied teaching methods on the account of the diversity of students and instructional approaches.

*The availability of these different ways/methods in crafting our lessons tells us also that our students are diverse and that no single method/way will work for all. We must be innovative enough to look for other ways that will best suit the needs and differences among our learners. We should always remember that it is us, the teachers that will have to adjust for our learners so that we will be able to penetrate their world and from that we can make ourselves more understandable to them. For instance, for highly theoretical lessons, not all students will understand the discussion by simply using the chalk-talk method and that is why we must learn to use other means like hands-on activities or with the use of multimedia in further illustrating the concepts/terms. (PB10, entry 1, para 2)*

**Beginning social connection subcategory** - The highest subcategory in the exploration type is beginning social connection, in which one partly points out the connection of social, political, economic, or historical conditions to situations. Nonetheless, the writing still centers on the consideration of other people or perspectives. SD4's entry is an example of the beginning social connection subcategory of reflective writing, wherein, she expresses the influence of the teachers' environment in the development of their educational philosophies. Albeit, the focus of the writing is the teachers and their philosophies, not on the social underpinnings of their philosophies.

*Educational philosophies give direction to the goals, theories, and practices of education. Teachers, when they come to school, bring with them their own personal philosophies and combine these with the philosophies of the institution where they practice. It is quite confusing as to which should be preferred, though in most cases teachers would follow the school's philosophies over their own. This doesn't mean that the teachers' personal beliefs are not as effective or reliable as those of the schools'. This just shows that educational philosophies also guide teachers to act professionally and give schools their structures and standards. As teachers who have varying experiences and training, we have different reasons why we teach and beliefs about what learning is. These experiences, values, and even the environment in which we live in influence our philosophies. Even if we follow our schools, we also bring in pieces of ourselves in our classrooms. (SD4, entry 2, para 2)*

#### 6.4 Subcategories of Expansion

*Social discourse* and *transformation* are the subcategories of the expansion type of reflective writing.

**Social discourse subcategory** - In the beginning social connection subcategory of the exploration type of reflective writing, the social dimensions of experiences and situations are already implied. However, it is in social discourse that the social aspects and factors that underpin circumstances and experiences become the focal point of the reflective writing and rumination, as presented in the excerpt of PE5's entry.

*I think Reconstructionist thinking is not widely practiced in the Philippines, because Filipinos are known to be peace loving or a better word would be "passive" type of people. We are known to be people who are "submissive" and we tend to resign to whatever circumstance we are in. Most Filipinos will just accept whatever state they are in, and believe it is their "fate". Perhaps it is the most compelling reason why we did not developed continuously like our Asian neighbors, even though we are rich in natural resources and hardworking labor force capital. Or maybe the long years of being under colonial domination made us developed such passive character. (PE5, entry 8, para 3)*

**Transformation subcategory** - The pinnacle subcategory in the exploration type and in the entire RWC is transformation. In this subcategory, the learner proposes action plans or recommendation, or urges people to

address issues that afflict society. Further, this reflective writing may display learners' recognition of their role in creating solutions to problems, as what is suggested in participant PA1's reflective writing. In this subcategory of reflective writing, we may glean the individuals' recognition of their part in a broader community; thus, show understanding that they should work collectively with others for change and transformation.

*It is definitely not a good thing though. The longer we stand idle, the longer we look the other way, the deeper these characters get entrenched in our midst. It is scary to think that when we eventually decide to make a move, it will no longer matter. So what are we waiting for? Let us act...now. As future educators, let us raise the awareness of our students. Let us wake them up from the lethargy that the present environment has lulled them. We do not have to take radical steps, we do not need a revolution, and we do not need a conflict. What we need is a healthy sense of social responsibility. But of course, it has to start somewhere. And the best place to start is within us; let us have faith in ourselves, let us believe that in our own little way...we can make a difference. (PA1, entry 8, para 2)*

The transformative nature of this subcategory is consistent with some of the advocacy of critical pedagogy for social transformation and praxis (Zimmerman, 2009). As Jay and Johnson explained, through critical reflection, educators could perceive themselves as catalysts for change.

During the initial stages of the analysis of learners' reflective writing in eJournals, I was able to determine the need for a clarified definition of reflection and for more distinctive descriptions of categories in Hatton and Smith's model. Through this study, I was able to uncover subcategories of reflective writing that could facilitate better understanding and assessment of reflective outputs, which led to the development of the RWC. The new framework, with its nuanced and specific classification scheme, will be valuable to effective evaluation of reflective works and contributory to the field of reflective learning and practice.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research**

Reflective writing, to be truly effective, requires teachers and learners to have a clearer understanding of what reflection means and what features characterize deep reflection (Russell, 2013). It is, therefore, essential that teachers and learners can easily discern the different forms of reflective writing and be able to assess the level of reflection that their reflective writing exhibits. With the current state of reflective practice as expressed in various literatures, the understanding of reflection, to some extent, still seems to be disjointed and muddled. The confusion experienced during the content analysis in this study confirms this predicament, which impelled the clarification of the definition of reflection and the creation of a framework that provides distinct descriptions.

This study presents a refined definition that emphasizes reflection as a personal, metacognitive undertaking that involves self-examination and the mulling over not only of one's thoughts, actions and experiences, but also of feelings, and the exploration of the reasons for them. A new model, the Reflective Writing Continuum, has been developed from the emergent themes that resulted from the rigorous content analysis conducted. The RWC presents salient features of reflection, such as the integration of the self and affect in the reflective process, and offers fresh and easily recognizable terminologies and specific descriptions to facilitate the important task of conducting an effective examination of levels of reflection. Furthermore, it shows the types of reflective writing as a progression from the non-reflective towards the reflective sections of the continuum and as a gradient of increasing breadth of perspective, i.e., from narrow, singular perspective that focuses on the self to a broader perspective that takes into account the more expansive social system (see Appendix).

The RWC, with its subcategories and explicit descriptions, can help teachers and learners have a better understanding of the characteristics of reflections and the various types of reflective writing, and can function as a self-assessment tool to improve reflective outputs. Having a concrete and definitive evaluation scheme or rubric for assessing reflective work is important to learners (McGuire, Lay, & Peter, 2009); hence, educators may utilize the RWC as a guide in developing assessment criteria for students' reflective writings. In future research,

the RWC can be refined and further validated via a larger number of sampling size and wider disciplinary coverage. In addition, clarifying depth of reflection as opposed to breadth of reflection and incorporating both in the model would also be significant in the enhancement of the RWC.

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Appendix: The Reflective Writing Continuum

Reflective Writing Continuum

Definition of Reflection: Reflection is a process of engaging one's self in metacognition and self-evaluation, wherein one is purposefully exploring his/her thoughts, feelings, actions, processes, experiences, and circumstances, as well as their underlying rationale.

Description	Explanation	Exploration	Expansion
<p><b>Definition</b> Definition of terms, statement of facts, summary of concepts, direct quotations</p>	<p><b>Explained Experience</b> Description of experiences with simple explanations</p>	<p><b>Alternative Reason</b> Discourse over alternative reasons/perspectives for experiences or insights</p>	<p><b>Social Discourse</b> Discourse on the explicit connection of situations or experiences to socio-political-historical contexts</p>
<p><b>Narration</b> Narration of events or experiences without explanation/interpretation</p>	<p><b>Explained Response</b> Expression of and with some explanations for one's responses (thoughts, actions, feelings) to events or situations</p>	<p><b>Critique</b> Critique on personal experiences/insights based on multiple perspectives which may include comparing and contrasting/cause-effect reasoning</p>	<p><b>Transformation</b> Call to action or proposal for social changes and transformation</p>
<p><b>Commentary</b> Statement of opinions, exposition, or discussion of concepts or ideas</p>	<p><b>Perceptual Interpretation</b> Personal interpretation for experiences and decisions</p>	<p><b>Hypothesis</b> Hypothesis on experiences/insights/situations based on multiple perspectives</p>	<p><b>Generalization</b> Generalization or recommendation based on the consideration of multiple factors or alternative perspectives</p>
	<p><b>Perceptual Justification</b> Justification for personal generalizations or realizations</p>	<p><b>Beginning Social Connection</b> Analysis of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that partially links to broader social context</p>	



