**Description:** Collecting reflections, for example through reflective diaries, logs and journals, is a form of ethnographic narrative research. Such records can also be part of a reflective pedagogic approach encouraging learners to reflect on and consolidate their experience. For research and evaluation logs/diaries allow practitioners to hear the voice of participants or stakeholders by giving them a chance to express their thoughts and changes they experience as a part of their experience of a project or activity.

**Application:** Reflective diaries can be used to collect information on participants' 'journey' and to assess progress through a scheme or activity. A great deal of evaluation attempts to elicit that journey. Reflective diaries offer a medium to evidence participants' thought processes while, completing the diary itself, can help participants to recognise their own journey.

**Type of evidence:** Qualitative. OfS Type 1 (narrative)

**Strengths:** The act of reflection can be beneficial to the individual to consolidate their thinking on a topic and reinforce learning. Indeed, developing reflective practice has been shown to support people's personal and professional development by providing the opportunity to review their experiences (Ashby, 2006; Bolton, 2010; Cunningham & Moore, 2014). Reflection is considered one of the key metacognitive skills.

Reflection can be a key aspect of the pedagogic approach of a programme of activity, although reflection requires time and some scaffolding. In this way the data can be made to be 'naturally occurring'. A reflective activity can be used to reinforce messages around identifying one's own goals and evaluating one's own achievements as well as areas in need of attention.

Reflective accounts can capture in-depth, detailed data in a timely way that might otherwise be quickly forgotten. The method sometimes can help in collecting sensitive information (although there is the problem of over or under reporting and social desirability bias).

**Weaknesses:** There can be challenges in getting people to complete reflective logs/diaries. Not everyone finds reflection easy. Using written accounts may alienate some people, such as students with dyslexia.

The usefulness of the information provided in reflective accounts can be very variable (although having a well thought out structure can help with this). To be useful the reflections need to be serious, specific, as thorough as possible and ideally include evidence to back up thoughts and feelings.

Interpretation of the information can be challenging. For example, the meaning of phrases in accounts can be obscure and there could be other challenges if the accounts are incomplete or there are difficulties in reading handwriting.

Although reflective accounts provide insights into changes, the method cannot imply a causal relationship between the activity and any changes observed.

**Mixed Methods:** Data from reflective logs is self-reported and therefore subject to reliability problems associated with this type of data; for example, it can tend to be subject to exaggeration or various biases including social desirability bias. Therefore, for impact evaluation it can be helpful to triangulate evidence based on reflective diaries against other sources of evidence of the outcomes.

**Expertise:** Medium

**Requirements:** In order to facilitate the collection of reflections as evaluation evidence, some sort of structured diary or template can be used to support reflection and organise people's thoughts. Unless the information is collected in a structured way, its usefulness tends to be limited because of the difficulties in analysing/making sense of this kind of data. Some formats are easier to use as research data than others. For example, doing reflections online or in electronic forms makes them easier to access as evaluation evidence than paper copies for example.

**Ethical considerations:** The main concerns relate to how reflective information is gathered and used. The information must be collected in ways that provide benefits while avoiding harm. It's important that the participants

understand the research goals and share information voluntarily. People's autonomy to make decisions about participating in the research needs to be respected.

Unlike other methods of research, which usually involves a team of objective and unbiased researchers who design data collection and apply it to the research 'subjects', reflection is considered to have intrinsic value, in which everyone gains. Therefore, in one sense the method is considered less intrusive than other forms of research. At the same time, careful consideration needs to be given to avoiding harm since it could be that participants have reasons for keeping the conditions of their lives and experiences unknown.

Consideration needs to be given to appropriate levels of disclosure, and this may need to be negotiated with ethics review boards and participants themselves.

Protection of anonymity is important, and this includes making sure the stored reflective record preserves the identity of individual participants, as well as reporting the information appropriately.

| | |
|---|---|
| Work planning: | If the reflection is part of another activity then the participants will be the population of the activity. Otherwise, you will need to recruit volunteers. If not, you could ask people to put themselves forward (appealing to altruism) or recruit people through another appeal, for example as part of a follow-up to a survey (see below). You could offer an incentive for getting involved. |
| | There are different scaffolding tools, depending on the aims of the evaluation. Typically, scaffolding includes some written instruction as well as group practice. Tools like the Jelly Baby Tree can be used at the end of sessions to model and demystify reflection (see guide note on Using Symbols). It is important to remember that reflection is very seldom used in education. People have a tendency to evaluate the programme, the teacher or the resources when asked to reflect on an activity. Modelling needs to demonstrate how to reflect on one's own actions. |
| | It is usual for the participants to be given a format or booklet, providing a clear set of instructions, assurances on confidentiality and how the information will be used. It is often helpful to include an example entry. Online recording tools will help you capture the outcomes of the reflections more easily. |
| | The time chosen for reflection should be during or close to the event for accuracy (unless the reflections are part of a rolling programme (e.g. you are collecting reflections from students during the academic year) or you are asking people to reconstruct events after the fact). If the time for reflection is built into an activity, then there needs to be ample time for this (10-20 minutes). |
| Analysis: | This will probably involve intensive and repetitive reading of the reflections to identify patterns and themes. Drawing conclusions is likely to be informed by intuition and it may be helpful to refer to existing theories and models of behaviour to discover the meanings in the narratives. Word clouds are a good tool to visualise common topics, and qualitative analysis software tools (such as NVivo or MAXQDA) can be used to analyse reflective diaries systematically and are especially good for thematic analysis because they allow you to systematically code the evidence against the relevant themes that have emerged. |
| Reporting: | Report the results by identifying the recurrent themes and looking for patterns (e.g. by taking in consideration demographic characteristics for example). When reporting the findings, you may want to support the conclusions by using quotes to describe what occurred from the participants' perspective. |
| Useful link(s): | **The University of Edinburgh Reflection Toolkit:** a collection of tools and information to help people to reflect or facilitate reflection in others. **https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection/reflectors-toolkit** |

**References**
Ashby, C. (2006). The benefits of reflective practice. Practice Nurse, 32(9), 35-37
Bolton, G. (2010) Reflective Practice: writing & professional development. London: Sage Publications
Cunningham, N., & Moore, K. (2014). Beyond the 'swampy lowlands': the welfare benefits of reflective practice through learning. Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, 22(3), 271-75.

## Reflective Logs: Case study/Practice example

A Uni Connect partnership is encouraging the use of reflective practice and has agreed a format for a Reflective Journal, which is being rolled out as a small scale pilot. The Journal is a resource for activity planning as well as evaluation, and is being used by Higher Education Progression Officers, who are school-based practitioners who work with small cohorts of young people. The Journals are used to record the activities undertaken by the young participants, along with their thoughts and feelings on these and any next steps. The aim of collecting this data is to help the team understand why particular interventions in particular contexts have either worked or not worked, and the benefits to those involved. In Phase 2, these journals will be rolled out more widely to school/college staff, and more systematic collection of this data will be implemented. The data collected is being analysed by the team as part of debriefs with reference to the different activities being undertaken. It is hoped that the Journals will support understanding and decision making on which combinations of activities are more effective in different contexts.

## Reflective Logs: Case study/Practice example

The Capital L Summer School is a week programme for Sixth formers which aims to help learners find out about what it is like to study at university, discover new languages and cultures, and be taught by academics from different universities. It is delivered by the University of SOAS, Queen Mary University, UCL, the University of Westminster and King's College London. In June 2020, the programme was offered as an online course on Moodle, via live sessions and resources. Participants created their own accounts on the system. Reflective questions were used from the start.
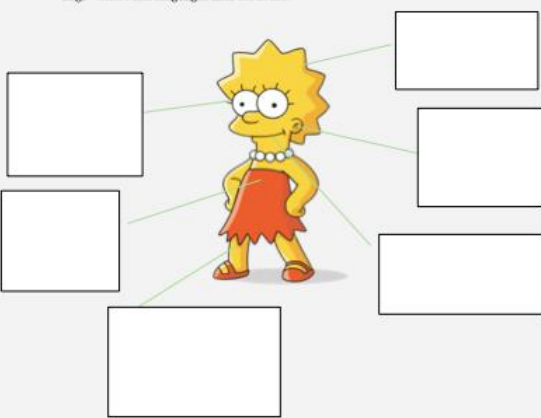
As a pre-task learners were asked to reflect on their experience as a language learner, which parts they found easy and fun, and which parts they found difficult and boring, develop a picture of themselves as a language learner, interview someone who speaks a foreign language, and write down their thoughts on studying languages at university.

Questions addressed to learners at the end of each session were designed to tease out what they had learnt from the session. Plus, learners were encouraged to write down words or phrases to capture how they felt about their experiences during the day. The diaries contained an end-of-the day active review exercise designed to help learners consolidate their learning (and hopefully lead to the learning becoming embedded and positive changes in the future). The end of day template was based on the model designed by Dr Roger Greenaway called the Four F's (https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/four-f).

Reflections were modelled at the end of each session and students completed the diary before the next lesson. The diary was shared with the teacher, who wrote back and engaged in a conversation with each participant.

2. A picture of myself as a language learner:

Head - what language(s) would I like to learn?
Ears - which languages have the best sounds?
Eyes - which foreign countries would I like to visit?
Mouth - what are my favourite foods from all over the world?
Heart - any foreign actor/celebrity/singer/politician I deeply admire?
Legs - where can languages take me in life?

### FACTS

What happened today?
What was most memorable/interesting?
Did anything unexpected happen? Did anything not happen that you thought/hoped would happen?

### FEELINGS

What are some of the feelings you experienced?
At what point did you feel most or least involved?
What were your personal highs and lows?

### FINDINGS

What was most / least valuable?
What have you found out?
Would you do anything differently?

### FUTURE

How do you imagine using what you have learned?
How can you use the findings from today? What plan can you make for the future?