

ACTION RESEARCH

**Replacement of traditional sketchbook reflective journal
with reflective blogs to improve the quality and maintenance
of the reflective process**

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Abstract

In my current organization I observed that the reflective process by traditional sketchbook was not very effective method of reflecting. Reflective journal by reflective blog is the new and emerging trend and has been proven to be effective in other areas of teaching. This study was conducted to compare reflective process by using traditional sketchbook reflective journal and reflective blog. A group of 20 students used reflective blog for one week in 2D sessions and then they used sketchbook reflective journal for one week in 4D sessions. The results were assessed based on learning outcome set by UAL. Our results show that the reflective blog group achieved better outcomes in comparison to sketchbook reflective journal. Students also displayed a preference towards using reflective blog as a method of reflection in future.

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List of Abbreviations

AR Action Research

RB Reflective Blog

SBRJ Sketchbook Reflective Journal

UAL University Art London

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Action Research

Action research is a strategy used to investigate a problem or an area of interest. It is largely credited to Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1948). His theory was formulated out of his desire to promote social change and solve social problems democratically. Carr and Kemmis define the action research as “... simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practice, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Action research in education is a self-guided project to investigate or make enquiries by teachers into the effectiveness of their teaching and their students’ outcomes. It is a well-informed process aiming at bringing about change and development in professional practice and attempting to enhance the education system. An action research can result in educational change, personal and professional development, improvement in practice and awareness of new learning opportunities.

In the field of education there are three types of action research as described below.

- Individual action research is conducted by an individual researcher independently within a setting to investigate a problem.
- Collaborative action research is carried out by a group of researchers working together to achieve a potential solution.
- School wide action research is conducted by a team of staff members across the school or even on a larger scale to investigate a problem and come to a solution.

Action research starts with a question or a problem raised by the teacher, student, or the organization. These questions could be based around planning and designing a curriculum, organising materials and resources, delivering the teaching contents, or the assessment process. Once a problem is identified the next stage is to understand and analyse the problem. This would include collecting data which could be a simple feedback or could be based around students' results.

To conduct an action research various methods have been proposed. Various models of action research can be adapted to perform any particular action research. Action research models are chosen depending upon the type of question/ problem and the type of data and methodology involved.

Action research has been simplified into various steps which have the same underlying principles. The article published in Education Reforms defines action research as a cycle of action or cycle of inquiry, and comprises of the following steps:

- Identify a problem to be studied
- Collect data on the problem
- Organize, analyse, and interpret the data
- Develop a plan to address the problem
- Implement the plan
- Evaluate the results of the actions taken
- Identify a new problem
- Repeat the process

I have used the Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect model (Figure 1) to conduct this research. Generally once a question is identified following steps are taken based on the model below.

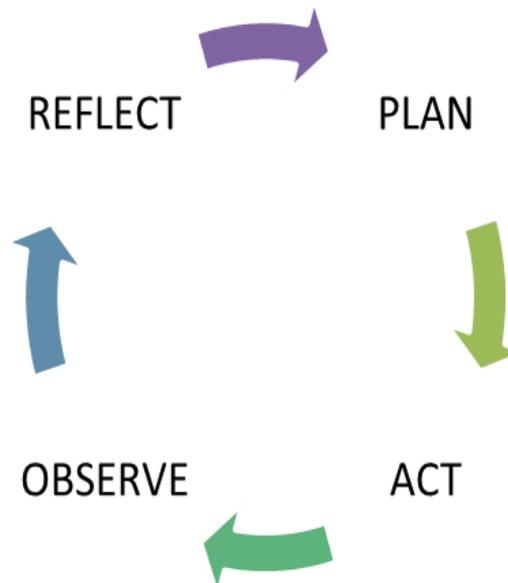


Figure 1: The Plan – Act – Observe – Reflect cycle (McAteer, 2013)

Plan: In this step a detailed investigation is performed about the question which might involve data gathering like questionnaire, feedback etc. After analysing the data an intervention is planned to improve or to solve a problem.

Act: Once an intervention is planned in the planning stage, all the students/stakeholders are informed about the change or a proposed intervention. It is made sure all the stakeholders are on board and everyone understands the intervention.

Observe: This is an important stage of the cycle where the post intervention data is collected and analysed.

Reflect: In this stage results are critically analysed. The intervention is analysed to see what results have been achieved.

Sometime the action research creates more questions and it is rarely a simple cycle as the initial cycle can lead to multiple cycles, in which the performance of the last cycle informs the next one. In this question the same cycle is repeated or the intervention is modified or new intervention is implemented to analyse the results (Figure 2). As the cycle progresses a greater understanding can be achieved through continuous refining of the information gathered.

All the stages in this cycle are multi purposed as the planning stage will become re-planning stage after the first cycle. The reflection stage is also a review and analysis stage. This observation can be related to an issue, problem or a difficulty either expressed by the learners or teacher.

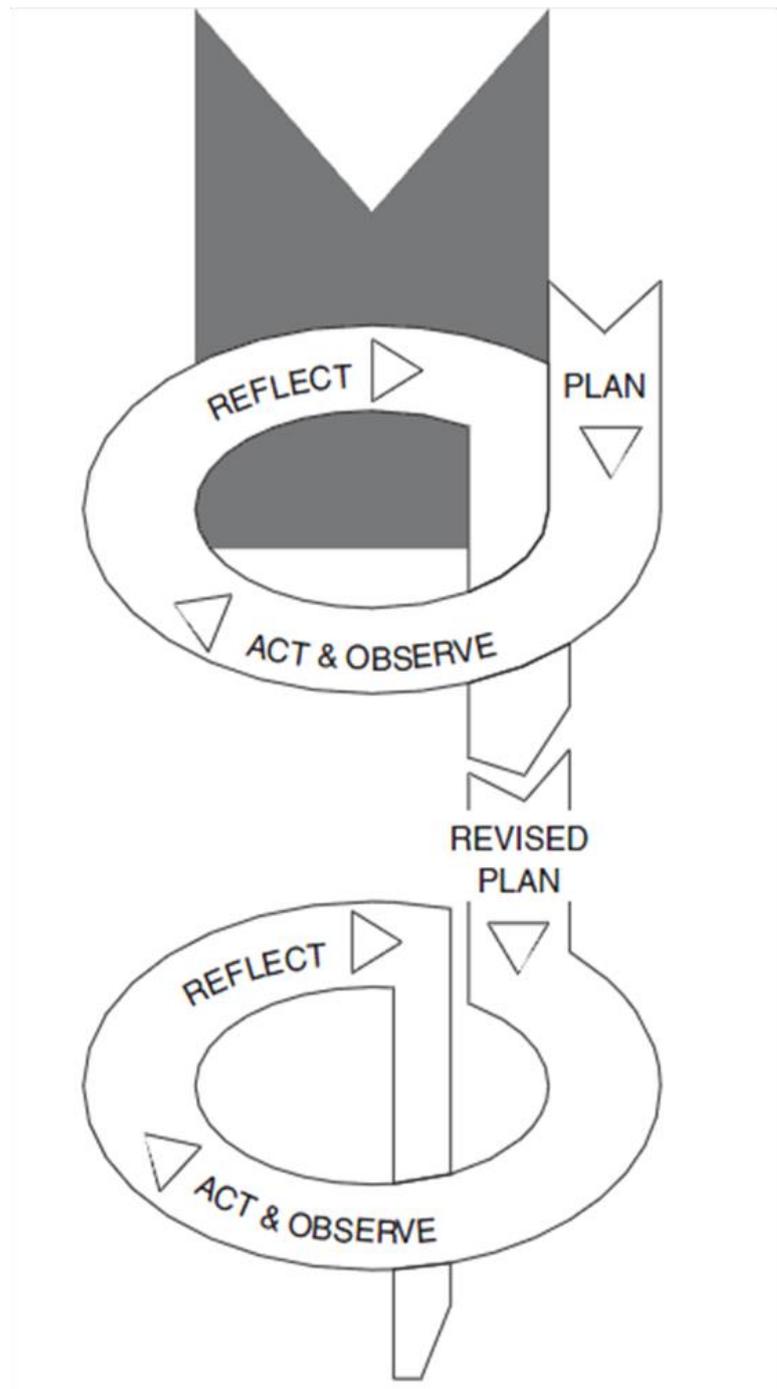


Figure 2: Cyclical model for Action Research (Kemmis & Mctaggart,1988)

1.2 Evaluation of methods of action research:

All research involves two methods inductive and deductive. An inductive research is to analyse the observed problem and to narrow the possibility of the study. A deductive research method starts with a hypothesis and sets to verify an observation a result in the study.

1.2.1 Methods of action of research

Research can be broadly divided into two types.

Quantitative research is based on collection of numerical data which deals with quantities, values or numbers to resolve the problem. This is a measurable process normally associated with deductive methods of research. The examples of quantitative data are length, size, amount, price, and even duration. This research is more credible as statistical tests generate reliable data.

Qualitative research is based on non- statistical elements like words, feelings, emotions, sounds etc. The research collects descriptive data as oppose to numerical data. This process is linked to inductive approaches.

1.2.2 Data collection: Qualitative vs Quantitative

In **qualitative research** interviews and focus groups are the most commonly used methods of data collection. Interviews evaluate and explore individual's views, experiences, and beliefs. There are three fundamental types of research interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Gill, 2008). The other method of data collection is focus groups. They are less structured interviews use to generate information on a particular

topic of discussion. This discussion is guided, monitored and recorded by a researcher. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Morgan, 1998). There are other methods of collecting qualitative data i.e. open end questionnaire, documents, case studies, and observations. Notice that qualitative data could be much more than just words or text. Photographs, videos, sound recordings and so on, can be considered qualitative data (McLeod, 2017).

In **quantitative research** there are various methods of data collection. Typically quantitative data is collected through experiments yielding data that is concerned with measuring things (McLeod, 2017). Other forms of data collection are clinical trials, defined observation, recordings, questionnaire, and surveys. Interviews are also used as a method of data collection but are standardised and structured. Interviews can be conducted in a number of ways for example face to face, on line, or on the phone.

1.2.3 Data analysis

Quantitative data is analysed through applying various statistical tests. The data generated through these tests gives us important information regarding trends, variations, relationships, and connections. Qualitative data, *on the other hand, is concerned with analysing* data that cannot be quantified. *This analysis gives a deeper understanding of why* a certain *problem* occurs. Qualitative analysis is subjective and exploratory in nature.

1.3 Background/Problem:

Students at my organisation use the traditional sketchbook reflective journal (SBRJ). In 2017 I taught Foundation art and design level 4. I was a pathway leader of 2D which comprised of photography, fine art, print making etc. It was observed that the quality of SBRJ was poor. It was also observed that the SBRJ, in most cases, was not the true

representation of students' performance. The feedback from the students showed that most of them were not happy with the process of reflection. They found the process to be time consuming and tedious. Students also thought that there was a lot of duplication of work as they had to print evidence and then attach to their SBRJ. Students also had to carry the SBRJ along with their sketchbook. On further questioning many students suggested to use reflective blog (RB) for reflections.

2. Literature review

Initially it is important to understand what a reflective journal is? Reflective journal can be a collection of experience, observation, notes, thoughts and other various related materials gathered over a period of time. The whole process is purposed around enhancing learning through writing and thinking. This process is referred to in a number of ways in a multitude of disciplines i.e. reflective logs, reflective journals, learning journals, reflective notes, learning diary, log books, and also sometimes as learning logs. The Reflective journal can be expressed in various forms, it is mainly concerned with recording evidence and the thought process in taking an action then reflecting on the achieved result. The process of effective reflective writing needs to be individual, logical, critical and creative. Therefore in addition to being reflective and rational, you can comment about your experiences, rather than merely drawing on academic evidence.

According to Brockbank & McGill a Journal is “a collection of your thoughts, feelings, speculations, and maybe dreams” (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). It has also been described as “written documents that student create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purpose of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning” (Thorpe 2004). Journal writing can allow students to reflect on new knowledge learned in class, solidify their learning experience by recording their evolving thought process as they progress further in the course, learn new material, and form new conclusions (Stevens & Cooper, 2009).

In the creative art discipline a reflective process consists of the following steps:

- Describe what action/activity has taking place, when and how it came about.
- Quote experience and observations made during the activity.
- Formulated ideas by creating a mind maps.

- Research practitioners and annotate their work.
- Getting alternative perspectives to formulate new ideas (example Peer review feedback).
- Focus on what was inspiring, interesting and why?
- Continually solve problems reach conclusion and get a better understanding of gained experience by reflecting and evaluating own performance.
- Make connections and comparing achievements and how to improve on the outcomes.
- Analysing and evaluating new opportunities and own performance.

Traditionally students write the reflection in books. With the evolution of the web and the introduction and popularity of blogs, students are moving away from books and traditional way of recording their reflective thoughts. Potential of blogs for reflective learning has been explored by various researchers including Amstrong et al (Amstrong , 2004), Williams & Jacobs (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), Yang (Yang, 2009). Mansor, A.Z. in his research about reflective learning journal using blogs, stated that “reflective learning journal is a good way to understand to what extent students understand what they have learned”. He also stated “reflective learning journal by using blog has shown a lot of advantages but it is not without some challenges and limitations” (Mansor, 2011).

I had observed many students in my previous organisation that used blogging as a form of learning and reflection. These students were creating interactive and creative reflective blogs (Figure 3). The feedback from those students who had used both means of reflection was much in favour of reflective blog. They were of the opinion that the SBRJ should be replaced with an online format so that they could be able to link their research, upload final evaluations, and attach videos to their work and much more.

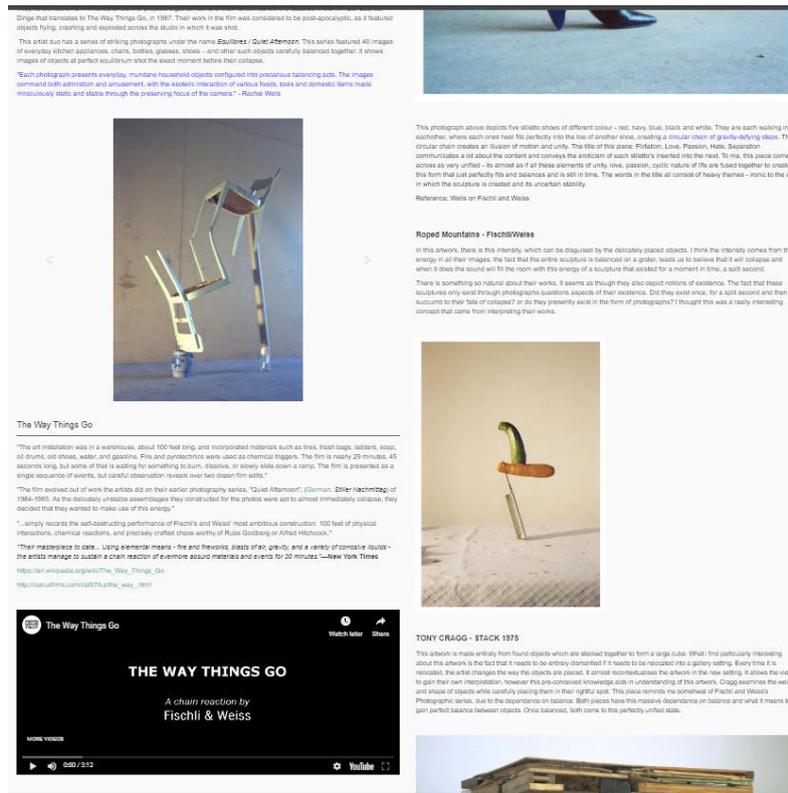


Figure 3: Previous student's Reflective blog example so small print

3. Methods:

Due to the poor quality of SBRJ in my current organisation I discussed the alternative option of blogging with the course leader. I raised the question, in the end of year department meeting, and put forward the proposal of replacing the SBRJ with the RB and quoted a few examples of Art Colleges that currently use them. A decision was made to develop this option under the supervision of the quality improvement team to ensure that the content produced and delivered was up to the college and qualification standard.

In the following weeks I developed the outline for the workshop and drafted all the paperwork required. To ensure that the students had all the right tools to get started with the reflective blog, after the approval of the quality improvement team, all annotation, evaluation and reflection based hand out were uploaded to Moodle. I also designed a PowerPoint presentation on how to create a Blog and reflect effectively which was also uploaded to Moodle.

It was apparent that timescales might prove to be problematic if not considered carefully. Before breaking for the summer break a meeting was held and after careful consideration and discussion with all the stakeholders involved (course leader, head of department and quality improvement department) we concluded that the foundation rotation was the most opportune time to undertake the research. I had prepared the bulk of my research project over the summer holidays with the intention of instigating my Action Research at the start of the college term.

Although I have conducted research before and had taken part in an action research, this was the first time that I was instigating an action research project. All the assessments of the SBRJ and RB would be completed in the same duration as per college policy but I gave myself till half term to complete the project.

Foundation Art and Design Level 4 class starts in September each year. The students are divided into four groups (A, B, C and D). Foundation has four pathways 2D, 3D, 4D, and fashion. Each group rotates weekly to get a taste of the four pathways. Each group comprises of 20 students. The students use SBRJ to reflect their work. The whole reflection is then assessed at the end of 4 weeks by using University Art London (UAL) Criteria and is given one of the four outcomes in each criteria and then an overall score is given (Figure 4). The outcomes are Referred (R), Pass (P), Merit (M), and Distinction (D).

	Fail Work submitted fails to meet one or more of the assessment criteria and is of a poor standard	Pass Work submitted meets all of the assessment criteria and is of a satisfactory standard	Merit Work submitted meets all assessment criteria and is of a high standard	Distinction Work submitted meets all assessment criteria and is of a very high standard
Evaluation & reflection	Insufficient evidence of on-going evaluation, lack of or only basic analysis and little or no justification for ideas.	Clearly communicated evidence of valid evaluation and realistic analysis independently used to inform and develop ideas.	Effective communication of analysis and interpretation, independent synthesis of information and application of reasoned decision making to inform development of ideas.	Accomplished and professional communication of perceptive analysis and interpretation, demonstrating clarity and sophistication in thinking and maturity in decision making to progress ideas.

Figure 4: UAL assessment criteria for Art and Design Level 4 (Only relevant sections are shown)

The students of September 2018 intake were explained the study design at the start of their year in the introductory lectures. The students also gained access to Moodle and Google classroom in the initial weeks. The students were explained the process and criteria of a reflective blog and shown exemplary work. A demonstration workshop was designed to explain how and where to create a blog. Group A was allocated time to create a blog in the presence of the instructor. They were shown a few further examples of reflective blogs and were informed of other help content available on Moodle and Google Classroom.

We decided the Group A (20 students) to use RB in my session (2D session) and then those students would use the traditional SBRJ in the other three rotational pathways. We would compare the same group of 20 students using RB in 2D session and using SBRJ in 4D session.

At the start of the first week the Group A (20 students) in my 2D session were advised to use RB as a means of reflection. Session was 2 hours long and is comprised of lectures, workshops and tutorials. The students were given last 30 minutes to write their reflection by using RB. The students were also encouraged to use the RB in their own time while out of class or at home.

The following week the Group A moved to 4D sessions where they were taught by another lecturer. As they had been explained earlier, they were advised to use SBRJ for their reflection in that session. Similar to the previous session, the 4D session comprised of mixture of lectures, workshops, and tutorials. They were again given last 30 minutes at the end of each session to write the reflections in their sketchbooks. They were also provided facility to photocopy and print their work to attach to their sketchbooks. Students, similar to RB, had the opportunity to do the SBRJ at home. For week 3 and 4 the Group A moved to 3D and fashion respectively and they use SBRJ for their reflective work.

Assessment Guidance: What you should aim to produce	
Learning Outcomes The candidate will:	Assessment Criteria The candidate can:
Unit 4: Art & design evaluation and reflection Unit Aim: To enable the candidate to develop planning, recording, analytical, reflective and evaluative skills which support their own learning.	
1. Analyse and reflect on own learning to inform on current progress & possible future study or work.	1.1 Analyse own progress and performance. 1.2 Identify relevant progression opportunities for future study of work.
4. Use reflective skills in order to review how effective plans, methods and actions have been.	4.1 Maintain reflective records e.g. reflective journal or log. 4.2 Review how effective own learning, plans, methods and actions have been.

Figure 5: UAL assessment guidelines 4 (only relevant sections are shown).

At the end of four weeks, after the students had a week each in all the four pathways, the assignments were assessed as per UAL guidelines (Figure 4 and 5). To decrease the bias only 5 students were assessed in 2D by me and the course leader to create a baseline of assessment which is a standard operational procedure. The other 15 students of Group A were assessed by the 3D lecturers. Figure 5 shows the learning outcomes which were compared between the two groups for the study purpose. All the other criteria (not shown here) were also assessed but not used in the study data. It was considered that the two studied learning outcomes (1 and 4) would be affected most by the change of reflective process and would give the true reflection of any change observed.

I also interviewed all 20 students from Group A individually at the end of 6 weeks. Each student was asked a specific question that if they would prefer RB or SBRJ for future reflection process. Students were also asked to give any other general comments about the two processes regarding advantages disadvantages, or any other challenges. The weekly time line for the study is shown in Figure 6.

Time line	Description of events
Week 1	Group A (20 students) first pathway introduction to 2D. Students used Reflective blog (RB) for reflective purposes.
Week 2	Group A (20 students) first pathway introduction to 4D. Students used Sketchbook Reflective Journal (SBRJ) for reflective purposes.
Week 3	Group A (20 students) first pathway introduction to Fashion. Students used Sketchbook Reflective Journal (SBRJ) for reflective purposes.
Week 4	Group A (20 students) first pathway introduction to 3D. Students used Sketchbook Reflective Journal (SBRJ) for reflective purposes.
Week 5	Assessment weeks
Week 6	
Week 7	Interview week Group A (20 students). Students were asked about their preferred method of reflection and any general comments about both reflective processes.

Figure 6: Weekly timeline

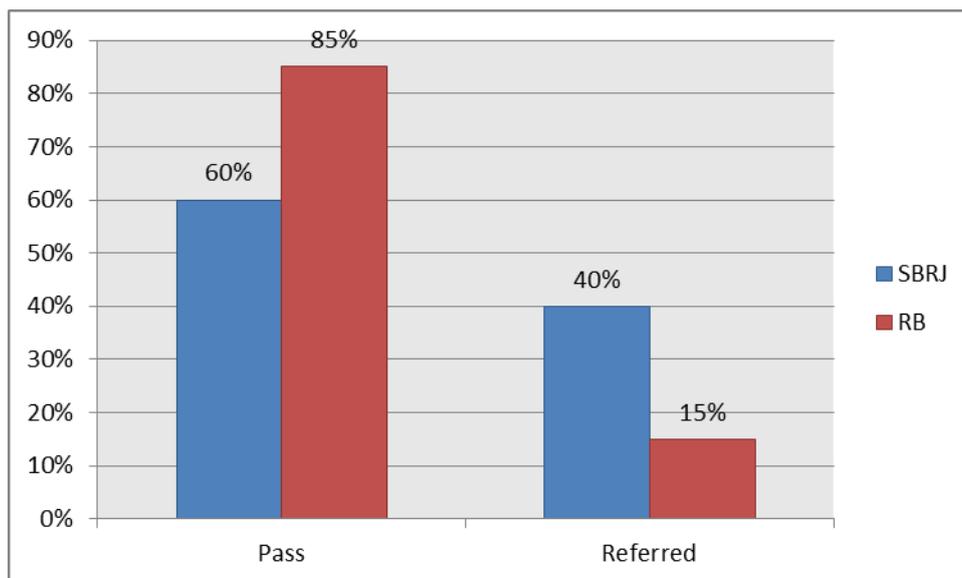
4. Results:

Group A (20 students) was compared in 2 criteria of the Unit 4 which are based on reflection between SBRJ and RB. Learning outcome 1 and learning outcome 4 (Figure 5) were assessed as per UAL guidelines. For each learning outcome students were assigned on of the four assessment criteria (Figure 4).

The data collected in this research, based on learning outcomes 1 & 4 (Figure 5), falls under quantitative data. The data generated through structured interview was quantitative and the comment session was quantitative in manner.

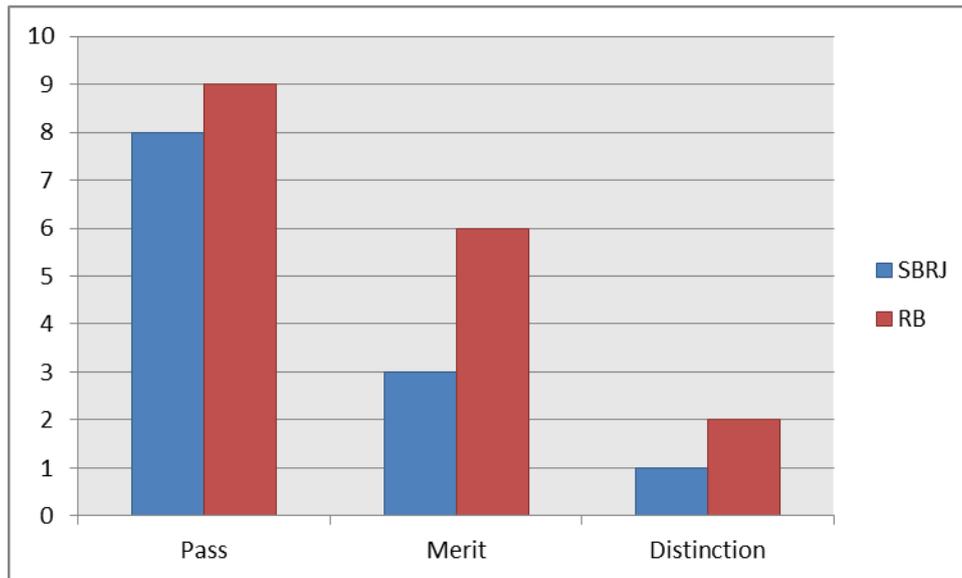
4.1 Learning outcome 1

Graph 1 shows the overall performance of 20 students for learning outcome 1. It is clear that overall there was increase in pass rate in RB group. 17 students (85%) students passed the assessment. It is also clear that only 15% students were referred (failed) in RB compared to much higher percentage (40%) in SBRJ.



Graph 1: Overall result for learning outcome 1

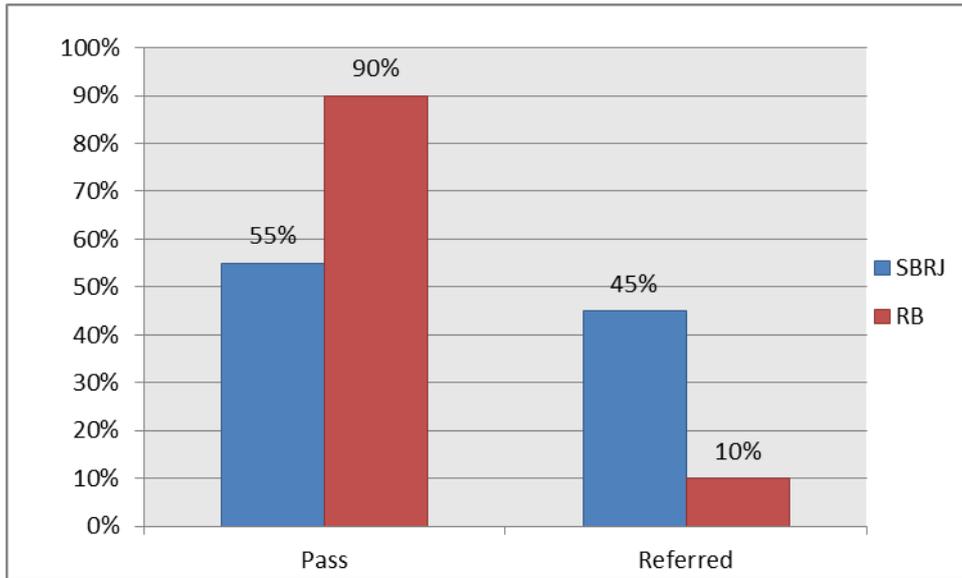
Graph 2 shows further sub division of 17 students who passed in RB and 12 students in SBRJ group. As shown in Figure 4 all pass students fall into one of the three categories which are pass, merit, or distinction. It is clear that RB group achieved much higher rate in pass, merit and distinction categories.



Graph 2: Individual categories of pass students in learning outcome 1

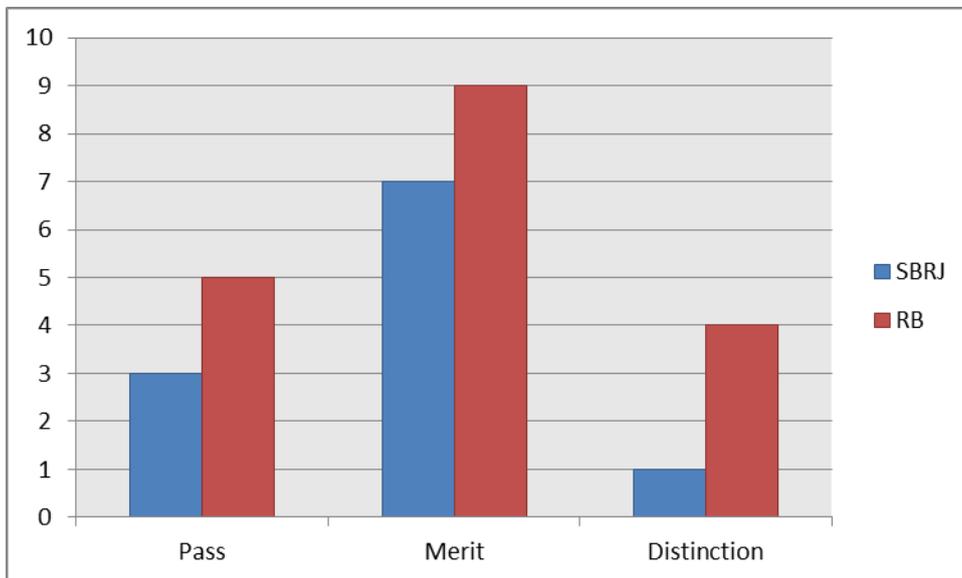
4.2 Learning outcome 4

Learning outcome 4 assesses the maintenance of reflective records and how effective are students' learning and action plans. Graph 3 shows the overall results of the two groups in learning outcome 4. The graph shows that the RB group shows higher (90%) pass percentage compared to SBRJ group (55%). Similarly only 10% students were referred in RB group compared to 45% in SBRJ group.



Graph 3: Overall result for learning outcome 4

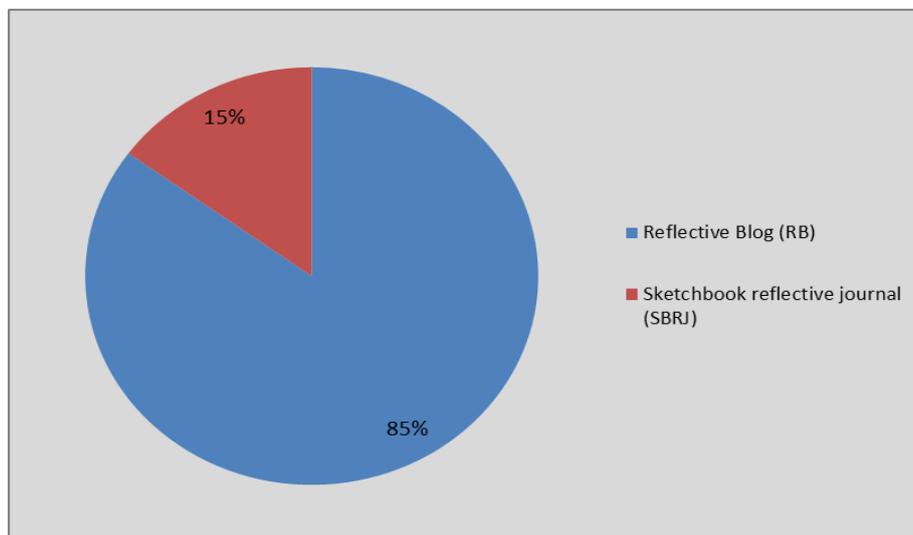
To assess if there was any difference in merit and distinction criteria further sub analysis of pass students was performed. Graph 4 shows there was higher number of students in both merit and distinction group in RB category.



Graph 4: Individual categories of pass students in learning outcome 4

4.3 Interviews

At the end of 6 weeks tutorials are held with each student as part of their placement in the selected pathways. I took this opportunity of conducting interviews and asked to provide the feedback about both reflective processes. They were specifically asked if they liked one method of reflection over the other. 17 students (85%) said they would prefer RB as a preferred method of reflection compared to only 15% who preferred SBRJ (Graph 5). Students were also enquired about the advantages, disadvantages, and any challenges faced in either process. It was general impression that RB was easy and flexible and they could do on their own time at home. They said it was convenient as they could do at home without having to copy stuff and then paste in the sketchbooks. They also liked the idea of being able to reflect at various times of the day on different devices. Some students although found RB as a convenient way of reflection but missed the opportunity of creating an interactive sketchbook journal. One student who had a very interactive and colourful sketchbook commented that she felt she did not have the opportunity to show case her creativity.



Graph 5: Preferred method of reflective journal for the students

5. Conclusion:

Reflective blog group achieved better outcome in reflective writing assessment compared to sketchbook reflective journal. Students also showed preference towards using reflective blog as a preferred method of reflection in future.

6. Discussion

This study clearly demonstrates that the students who used RB as a method of reflection achieved significantly better results in the learning outcome (Graph 1 and 3). Students visibly performed better in analysing their own work (Graph 2 and 4). One observation from my personal experience at my previous organisation, where students used reflective blogs, was the flexibility of time to reflect. In my current organisation I have observed that the frequency and maintenance of reflection in classes who used SBRJ was poor. This study demonstrates that the students in RB were better able to maintain reflective records of writing based on learning outcome 4 (Graph 3 and 4). This is an important observation as students can use various electronic devices e.g. mobile, tablets, PC, or laptops, to write their reflection in their own time which gives them much more flexibility. Similar observations were made in another study (Biggerstaff 2005) where the author concluded that reflective blog is more flexible with no time restriction and give more autonomy.

In RB students do not have to carry sketchbook with them at all the time and they can use their electronic devices to write which likely increases the frequency of their reflection. The other problem students face in SBRJ is to copy their work and then to past in their sketchbook. With RB they can easily take a picture and attach to their work electronically which makes the reflection much easier. During the interview process students also mentioned that they found the process of uploading their PowerPoint presentations much easier. They also mentioned that in all the other pathways they had to print their PowerPoint presentation and then attached to their SBRJ along with their final evaluation. They found that the process took precious time away their main portfolios sketchbooks. They did not face this problem in 2D as they had ample time to focus on their main portfolio sketchbooks. Students using RB also found much easier to link their peer reviews, tutorial outcomes, mind maps, and action plans.

One student preferred sketchbooks as she could be more creative with paper sketchbook. The RB cannot be used in BTEC qualifications as their work is mostly A3 sketchbook based.

Our results are similar to previous studies. Mansor (Mansor 2011) demonstrated that reflective learning journal by using blog has a lot of advantages but it is not without some challenges and limitations. Another study showed that reflective blogs help to improve students' awareness of their own learning process (Murugaiah and Thang 2010).

This process demonstrates that if a teacher focuses on a particular area of interest in an action research then meaningful results can be achieved as also explored by other authors (Mertler, C.A. 2013). This process polished my existing skills and I have extensively developed my own understanding on how to propose a question, conduct research, and implement an action to attain results. This process gave me time to reflect and review the data and cross check its findings. I then presented the finding in the college monthly meeting in the presence of the head of department and quality improvements managers along with other teaching staff members. The results of the study were widely appreciated and the head of the department was keen to run it as a collaborative project across Foundation Art and Design.

7. Limitations

To decrease the bias in the study the assessments were not performed by their teachers. This is a single centre study with a small sample of 20 students. Further studies are required with bigger groups and also in various fields of teaching to assess the subject further. Also the study was only performed for a short period of time i.e. one week. A longer duration study should be conducted to see if the results are persistent for longer duration as well. It was not possible to conduct the study as blinded because the teachers assessing their work knew if the reflection was done on sketchbook or on reflective blog.

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