

Looking Back to Move Forward: Reflective Practices in Higher Education

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Introduction

Climate and Society, offered at the University of Copenhagen (NIFK24001U), is a master's-level course that runs over two teaching blocks. The course introduces students to a range of social science approaches that in different ways examine how climate change comes to be known, analysed, and governed. Each approach is taught in a two-week module, with different instructors responsible. In 2024, I taught a module on sustainability transitions, which I developed from scratch, as it was the first time it was included in the course.

On the last day of my teaching, I wanted to design and conduct a teaching intervention that marked the end of the module and helped students consolidate and reflect on what they had learned. Since the course is structured around shorter, intensive modules with different teachers, I found it especially important to create a sense of closure. My goal was to create an opportunity for the students to revise the material we had covered as well as address lingering questions before transitioning to the next module. I wanted the intervention to be student-led to ensure that we focused on the areas which the students found most challenging, and I was eager to create an intervention that allowed all students to participate actively.

In developing my intervention, I have been particularly inspired by pedagogical literature that emphasizes the value of reflective practice, a concept grounded in broader constructivist theories of learning, which view knowledge as actively constructed (Dolin, 2015). Reflective practice or simply reflection can be defined and understood in numerous

ways (McCarthy, 2011). Here I rely on Boud et al. (1985 p. 19), who in the context of learning define reflection as the "intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations". In essence, academic reflection involves deliberately revisiting and analysing one's actions or experiences with the aim of turning them into learning. Through this process, learners gain a clearer sense of what they did, what they could have done differently, and how to approach similar situations in the future. In this way, reflection not only involves looking back but also serves as a form of mental preparation for future practice (van den Boom et al., 2007).

Pedagogical research highlights numerous potential benefits of developing reflective skills. Reflection is understood to enhance content area learning, including improving knowledge retention. Moreover, it is understood to support the development of metacognitive skills that is, learners' awareness of their own thinking and learning processes (Guo, 2022). Metacognitive abilities have in turn been linked to increased motivation, as well as the capacity for independent and lifelong learning across new situations and contexts (Dennis and Somerville, 2023, Van den Broeck et al., 2024). Despite these well-documented advantages, studies have found that most students do not engage in reflection on their own during the learning process (van den Boom et al., 2007), which consequently suggests a need for structured teaching and learning activities specifically designed to foster and encourage reflective practice. Against this backdrop, my intervention set out to create a space for students to engage with the material covered in the module in a more reflective manner.

In this project report, I first present the design and implementation of the teaching intervention and then evaluate it based on two sources of feedback. I aim to consider the pedagogical value of the intervention and reflect on how similar approaches might be adapted or improved in future iterations of the course.

Implementing the intervention

The teaching intervention consisted of five smaller steps (see overview in Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of teaching intervention

Step	Activity	Allocated time
1	Individual reflective writing	Pre-class
2	Sharing reflections in home groups ^a	40 min
3	Plenary sharing and regrouping by challenges	15 min
4	Collaborative sense-making and strategy building	45 min
5	Collective feedback and validation	Post-class

a. Eight groups of 6-7 students, assigned by the course convener and reshuffled half-way through the course.

Step 1: Individual reflective writing

In preparation for the class, I asked students to complete a short individual reflective writing exercise. Using two prompts that asked them to imagine writing to a friend on the course, students were encouraged to describe both their key takeaways from the module and any concepts or themes they still struggled to understand (my instructions to the students are included in the Appendix). The aim of this exercise was to help students articulate their understanding of the course independently, giving everyone a chance to reflect individually before engaging in group discussion. Asking students to write was grounded in the idea that putting thoughts into words can support deeper thinking and cognitive processing. Framing the task as a message to a peer was an intentional move to encourage first-person writing, which is typical of reflective practice and signals a focus on personal experience, emotion, and perspective (Bassot, 2023).

Step 2: Sharing reflections in home groups

At the beginning of the class, students gathered in their established home groups and read aloud their reflections to one another. They were then asked to identify similarities and differences in their takeaways and challenges. As a group, they chose one or two key learning struggles that stood out across their reflections. These were written on sticky notes in preparation for the next step. The intention of this activity was to ensure that learning challenges were identified and articulated by the students themselves. This approach was designed to give students a sense of ownership over the learning process by allowing their perspectives to shape which areas the class would spend time exploring further. To support open and honest sharing, I intentionally did not listen in or join the groups during this step.

Step 3: Plenary sharing and regrouping by challenges

We all reconvened in plenary. One by one, each group briefly presented their identified learning challenges. As a class, we grouped these into thematic clusters, ending up with six overarching areas of difficulty. Based on these themes, the students then formed six new groups, each focused on one of the shared struggles.

Step 4: Collaborative sense-making and strategy building

In their new groups, students worked collaboratively to deepen their understanding of their chosen struggle. They were asked to formulate key insights related to the issue, note what remained unclear, and identify strategies they might use to develop their understanding further. To support this process, students could revisit their notes, lecture slides, and readings from the module. Before the end of class, each group submitted a summary of their insights, continued questions, and suggested strategies via email. This step was partly intended to initiate students' exam revision by encouraging early engagement with areas of difficulty. It also aimed to draw on the group's collective competence to help shift students from confusion toward greater clarity—or at the very least, to a clearer articulation of what they did not yet understand. Just as importantly, it provided an opportunity for groups to reflect actively on possible strategies for moving forward. The goal was to move from simply stating, "I don't understand this," to saying, "I don't understand this yet, but

here's what I can do next.". During this step, I circulated among the groups, listening in and acting like a sparring partner in their discussion if they wanted that.

Step 5: Collective feedback and validation

After the session, I compiled the group submissions into a single document, which I annotated, offering pointers and clarifications to the points raised by each group. This annotated document was then uploaded to the Absalon course page. This final step served multiple purposes: it was a chance for me to validate the students' group work and to provide collective, written feedback efficiently and equitably to the whole class.

Evaluating the intervention

In evaluating the intervention, I draw on two sources of feedback: mainly a short questionnaire completed by the students at the end of the module, but also informal conversations with my academic and departmental supervisors, both of whom were present during the session.

The students' experience of the intervention

Following the class, I asked the students to complete an anonymous questionnaire about the day's teaching. Twenty-four students responded, which is a bit more than half of the 41 students who completed the course. Not all, however, were present at this final session.

Sixteen students reported that they had completed the writing exercise before class. Of the eight who had not, three said they did not have time. The remaining five explained that they either "answered in their head," feeling that "it didn't seem efficient to put my thoughts into writing," or that they had written their reflection as bullet points. One student remarked that "the letter felt more like a high school exercise."

Twenty students reported feeling either very comfortable (9) or comfortable (11) sharing their written reflections with their home group. One student felt neutral, and the remaining three said they had not done the exercise—these were the same three students who had reported a lack of time.

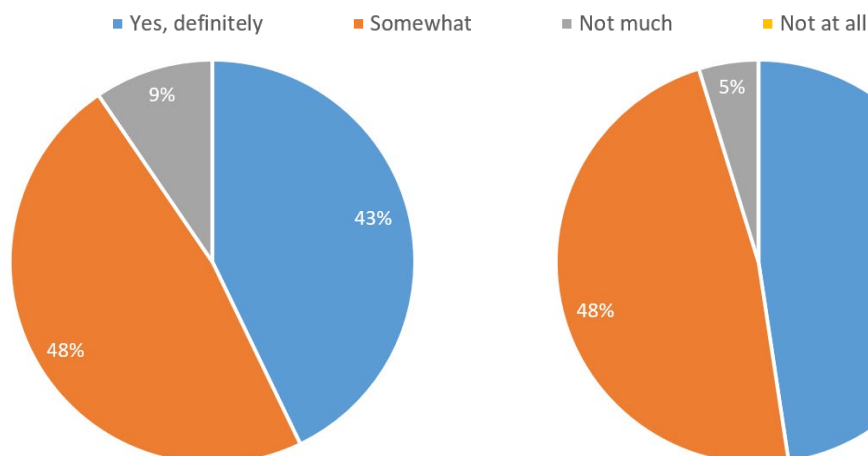


Figure 1. Distribution of student responses to the question: Did the exercise encourage you to reconsider or refine your understanding of the module?

Figure 2. Distribution of student responses to the question: Did the exercise help you identify gaps in your understanding of the module?

To assess whether the intervention supported reflection, I asked students to consider whether the exercise prompted them to reconsider or refine their understanding of the module (see Figure 1), and whether it helped them identify gaps in their knowledge (see Figure 2). In response to both questions, the majority of students indicated that the exercise either definitely or somewhat fulfilled these purposes. This suggests that the activity engaged students in the kinds of “intellectual and affective activities” described by Boud et al. (1985 p. 19), as they explored their experiences in ways that appeared to lead to new understandings and appreciations. When asked whether they would recommend including a similar exercise in future iterations of the course, one student responded neutrally, while 14 replied “definitely” and 9 replied “probably.” Notably, no students selected “probably not” or “definitely not.”

In an open-ended question, I asked students to share ideas of how to improve the exercise. Six students made comments here and two suggestions are mentioned more than once. The first relates to timing, where students suggest that the exercise should not be placed at the very end of the module. Instead, they would prefer to have another in-class meeting to revisit the struggles and questions identified rather than

getting written feedback on this. The second point relates to the format of the writing exercise. The three students who mentioned this were not enthusiastic about the creative writing element and instead suggested using a more structured template or simply listing bullet points.

Feedback from supervisors

Both my academic and departmental supervisors were present during the teaching session, and we followed up on the exercise afterwards. Overall, they felt that the intervention worked well, noting active participation throughout the session. They also agreed that the broader intention of dedicating time to "close" the module was worthwhile.

Both supervisors highlighted that the exercise generated valuable feedback for me, particularly by offering insight into what students found challenging in the course and how they engaged with the module content. This was not something I had considered when designing the intervention, but I agree with their observation and look forward to seeing whether future student groups encounter similar challenges. If so, I will begin to consider how these might be addressed in future iterations of the module.

My supervisors also encouraged me to be more explicit about the pedagogical intention behind the exercise, for example, by making it clearer in the instructions. The reasoning here is that when students understand the rationale behind an activity, they are more likely to be motivated to participate. I find this point compelling, particularly in light of the student feedback related to the writing component of the exercise, which I reflect on in more detail in the concluding discussion.

Concluding discussion

Overall, the evaluation of the teaching intervention suggests that it successfully created a space for students to reflect on the module content, which appeared to support the emergence of new understandings. I am encouraged by the feedback from both students and my supervisors and plan to continue this exercise in future iterations of the course.

In retrospect, I realise it would have been valuable to gain more insights into how the students felt about their ability to come up with

strategies for addressing the challenges they had identified. In future evaluations, I would include a survey question such as: “The group discussion helped me identify useful strategies to address aspects of the module I found challenging” or “After the session, I feel more equipped to deal with aspects of the module I found difficult.”

Based on the evaluation, there are two main areas I would like to adjust and further develop. The first concerns the format of the writing exercise. While some students did respond less positively to the more creative element, I would still like to keep this. However, following my supervisors' advice, I will clarify the pedagogical purpose of this part in the assignment instructions, particularly the rationale for asking students to write in the first person. To support this, I may include a reference to Barbara Bassot's *The Reflective Practice Guide*, so that students who are interested in the concept of reflective writing can explore it further.

The second area relates to timing. While I sympathize with the students' wish for an additional follow-up session after the intervention, I believe this would take too much time away from the hours we have to cover content. To address this concern, however, I plan to incorporate smaller reflective elements throughout the module in addition to this final exercise. For example, after each teaching session, I will make sticky notes available for students to anonymously leave me their 'muddiest point' – the concept or topic they found the most challenging that day. We can then revisit and clarify these points at the beginning of the next session, creating a more continuous and responsive space for reflection.

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Appendix

The following instructions were given to students before the teaching session:

There are no compulsory readings assigned for today's session, but instead I would like you to do a small writing exercise before we meet.

Pretend that you are writing a message to your classmate, let's call her Emma. Emma was down with influenza the past two weeks and missed the module. Now she is checking in to see what she has missed. Write your message to Emma using these two prompts:

Hey Emma. Glad to hear you're better, it sounds like a tough couple of weeks! These are my main takeaways from the module on sustainability transitions...

Honestly, there were aspects of the course I am still struggling with. I am kind of hoping that I will not be asked about XXXX in the exam.

Aim to write about half a page, and be prepared to share your message with your home group. This will be the starting point for a couple of different exercises we will do to summarize the module content and engage with the themes and topics that you find challenging.