
SELF-ASSESSMENT INITIATIVE

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Self-assessment; reflective practice.

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Self-assessment is a well-established practice in parts of the Higher Education sector. Research literature suggests that it has the potential to enable learners to better understand and assimilate assessment criteria, become more reflective practitioners, and engage more directly with assessment and feedback processes. During the first semester of 2010/11, the third year Special Subject module HS3735 The Russian Revolution, 1881-1924 added a self-assessment component to its assessed coursework. The aim of doing so was to: a) provide an opportunity for students to engage in reflective learning; and b) more generally, explore further the use and value of self-assessment from the point of view of students.

1. BACKGROUND

In 2007/08, Zoe Knox was awarded a New Teaching Initiative grant from the Staff Development Centre for a project introducing self-assessment and reflective practice to History finalists in her Special Subject. The proposal was to introduce a range of assessment tasks centred on a reflective practice initiative but it was discovered that having one Special Subject deviate markedly in its assessment methods would not be approved by the School's Learning and Teaching Committee for reasons of parity across the year group. A more modest initiative which supplemented, but did not supplant, the existing assessment pattern and which drew on the pedagogical principles underlying the initial proposal was introduced, in collaboration with Steve Rooney.

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Students completed two self-assessment tasks which they submitted alongside two essays for the module. The first task (Part A) was a direct assessment of the essay written, with students asked to anticipate the mark for the essay and to address, specifically, its strengths and weaknesses. The second task (Part B) was a more open, reflective piece of writing in which students were asked to think about their approaches to essay writing and to identify ways in which they could improve upon these. (See Appendix A).

Steve Rooney attended a HS3735 seminar in Week 3 and led a 25 minute discussion on the purpose of the self-assessment exercise, its relevance beyond the module, the assessment criteria and the submission procedures. The first task (assessment of the essay) was worth 5% of the overall essay mark. A marking criteria sheet was circulated to the students and written comments were offered as part of the broader feedback. The second task (the reflective statement) was also worth 5% of the overall essay mark. Again, feedback specifically on the reflective exercise was given alongside the usual comments on content, structure, argument, etc. In Week 10, shortly before the second essay was due, Steve Rooney facilitated a two-hour seminar. The students were required to prepare by considering key questions and completing required reading.

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Both the self-assessment section and the reflective statement produced some interesting commentary from the students which indicated a deeper level of engagement with the processes of reading, research and writing as well as time management. It was gratifying to see the students engage so readily with self-assessment practices, which were entirely new to them. The self-assessment sections were time consuming to mark, however.

At the beginning of the second semester, a focus group discussion was conducted by Steve Rooney in order to gain student feedback on the process. Half the cohort (8 students) participated in the discussion, which lasted for two hours and was scheduled outside class time. Participation was voluntary. Below, some of the main findings are summarised.

'Positive' feedback	'Negative' feedback
<p>--Positive engagement once the process was actually underway (E.g.: 'It was quite good actually, because it made me re-read my essay, because normally I would just stop there [the point of essay completion] ...'; '...you feel as though you've been more involved in the whole process of writing the essay, rather than just writing one.')</p> <p>--Initiated formative reflection (E.g.: 'because I knew I was going to have to do it [the self-assessment] I was a bit more conscious of, like, getting the structure right as I was going.')</p> <p>--Greater engagement with assessment and feedback process (E.g.: 'I think, um, especially putting yourself in the marker's shoes... I think what it has done is... you can look at the module guides or the, um, handbook that History give you, and see what makes that difference between a few marks'; 'Yeah, I mean if you write a bad essay... you just kind of</p>	<p>--The need to include reflective commentary on performance led to formulaic responses on occasion (E.g.: 'if you did go back over your flaws, then you're like: 'oh, now I don't have any weaknesses to write about'; 'I think it was a bit of it was trying to think of things to say that are – like - the right things to say – almost, like – er – trying to please the marker...')</p> <p>--Students fearful of self-sabotage when articulating both positive and negative comments (E.g.: 'because when I was writing the strengths I was thinking, if I haven't actually made this point very well and I then tell the person who marking it that 'this is a really good point, look at this' then they'll go 'Ah, no it's not!')</p> <p>--Particular difficulties with Part B, in which students were asked to translate reflections on the outcomes of the writing process into critical reflections on</p>

<p>get it [the marked essay], have a quick look at the mark and go “oh well”, whereas with, um, the fact that you’ve had to mark it, then you’ve got to check [feedback comments and essay] and that helps’)</p>	<p>improving the processes of writing (E.g. ‘I found this one a bit more difficult than the first one because it was asking for a more... not the strengths and weaknesses of one but more... what do you do about it?’)</p>
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4. EVALUATION

The third year Special Subjects seem the appropriate place in the curriculum to introduce self-assessment initiatives for a variety of reasons, chief among them the steady pace of the introduction of content and the ongoing contact with one tutor. Attention also needs to be given to the marking process to reduce the burden on the tutor.

5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

The initiative will be repeated in the 2011/12 session, this time for a new Special Subject (HS3751/52 Church, State and Belief in Soviet Russia, 1941-1991), taking account of some of the issues raised by students in the focus group discussion. There are a number of possibilities, including:

- steering the process away from very direct questions relating to essay strengths and weaknesses and towards more subtle questions relating to the process of writing;
- uncoupling the assessment of self-assessment from the assessment of essays, enabling students to self-assess without fear of self-sabotage; and
- building in greater scope for discussion and peer-assessment to support student engagement in the process.

An integrated mark sheet will be developed rather than a separate one commenting on the self-assessment and reflective practice sections of the two essays.

In 2011-12 the School of Historical Studies is undertaking a review of the Special Subject provision. A report on this project prepared for that review will feed into those discussions. A report has also been submitted to the School's Learning and Teaching Committee, which approved the revised project before it was implemented, and to the Head of School, Professor Rosemary Sweet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

New Teaching Initiative grant, Staff Development Centre, University of Leicester.

APPENDIX A

HS3735 The Russian Revolution, 1881-1924 (Part 1)

Steve Rooney (Student Development) and Zoe Knox (School of Historical Studies)

26 October 2010

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Assignment A & Self-assessment A (to be submitted with first 2,000 word essay)

Cut and paste the headings below into Assignment A:

- 1) Indicative mark (enter a percentage based on the School's marking criteria for essays; see pp.47-49 of the Student Handbook): _____
- 2) Abstract: What is, or are, your main arguments? (100 words)
- 3) What do you consider to be the essay's main strengths? (Refer to examples from your essay to justify your statement) (200 words)
- 4) What do you consider could be improved on in the essay? (Refer to examples from your essay to justify your statement) (200 words)

Assignment B & Self-assessment B (to be submitted with second 2,000 word essay)

With reference to Self-assessment A, your tutor's feedback for your first essay, and to your more general reflections on your essay writing, produce a 500-word statement which:

- 1) identifies the main areas you would like to focus on improving and developing in your own essay writing; and
- 2) outlines the strategies you will put in place in order to achieve the improvements you have identified.

The strategies outlined in 2) should relate clearly to the areas for improvement identified in 1).

APPENDIX B

HS3735 The Russian Revolution, 1881-1924 (Part 1)

Semester 1, 2010-11

Dr Z. Knox

Seminar 10

SEMINAR PREPARATION

Steve Rooney (Student Development) will be conducting a workshop during the seminar. It will feed into the Reflective Statement component of Assignment B and will help students with the process of historical research and writing more broadly.

Required reading

1. Lynn Hunt, 'How Writing Leads to Thinking (and not the other way around)', *Perspectives on History* (February 2010) at <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1002/1002art1.cfm>, accessed 29 November 2010.
2. 'Reflective Writing', *The Learning Centre* (undated) at <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/pdf/reflective.pdf>, accessed 29 November 2010.
3. Christopher Read, 'Writing the History of the Russian Revolution', *Reviews in History* (review no. 45) at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/45a>, accessed 29 November 2010.

After completing the required reading, prepare answers to the following questions:

1. Think about your own views on the process of writing. Is it difficult for you, 'like scaling a Himalayan peak', or does it come easily? How does your approach to writing differ from Lynn Hunt's?
2. How does Christopher Read reflect on his own historical research and writing? Consider his reflections on *A People's Tragedy*, on trends in modern Russian history, and on the broader field of historical research.
3. How might a reflective approach to writing improve your own historical writing and research? Reread the self-assessment component of Assignment A for this module and the feedback you received for the essay. How will these feed into your reflective statement?
4. Consider the relationship between the process of writing an essay (selecting a title, conducting research, taking notes, planning, editing etc.) and the finished piece of writing itself. How might focussing on your approach to the former, influence the quality of the latter?

APPENDIX C

HS3735 The Russian Revolution, 1881-1924 (Part 1)

Steve Rooney (Student Development) and Zoe Knox (School of Historical Studies)

26 October 2010

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Assignment A & Self-assessment A (to be submitted with first 2,000 word essay)

Cut and paste the headings below into Assignment A:

- 1) Indicative mark (enter a percentage based on the School's marking criteria for essays; see pp.47-49 of the Student Handbook): _____
- 2) Abstract: What is, or are, your main arguments? (100 words)
- 3) What do you consider to be the essay's main strengths? (Refer to examples from your essay to justify your statement) (200 words)
- 4) What do you consider could be improved on in the essay? (Refer to examples from your essay to justify your statement) (200 words)

Assignment B & Self-assessment B (to be submitted with second 2,000 word essay)

With reference to Self-assessment A, your tutor's feedback for your first essay, and to your more general reflections on your essay writing, produce a 500-word statement which:

- 1) identifies the main areas you would like to focus on improving and developing in your own essay writing; and
- 2) outlines the strategies you will put in place in order to achieve the improvements you have identified.

The strategies outlined in 2) should relate clearly to the areas for improvement identified in 1).