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Writing an Excellent Reflective Diary: Ten Suggestions from a QSEP Assessor

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Abstract

Based on my experience assessing on the BPS's Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP Stage 2), this article shares 10 suggestions for Trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologists and others on comparable qualifications to strengthen the quality of their reflective practice diary and, in turn, benefit the quality of their learning, development, research, and consultancy: (1) Make reflective practice a key part of the Plan of Training; (2) Experiment with different reflective models; (3) Showcase your awareness and understanding of literature; (4) Pick meaningful objects of reflection; (5) Be open, honest, and self-critical; (6) Engage with some of your *current* challenges; (7) Make supervision visible; (8) Offer specific action points; (9) Re-visit reflections and engage with what happened next; and (10) Offer a sense of who you are as a practitioner.

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Doing sport and exercise psychology is more complicated and ‘messier’ than neatly applying textbook theory, research, and ethical guidelines to clearly defined situations. Instead, there are many interacting factors to consider, which require practitioners to draw upon their *knowledge-in-action* or *craft knowledge* (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004). Knowledge-in-action is often tacit and spontaneous (Schön, 1987); in other words, practitioners draw upon their knowledge in a way that is intuitive, unspoken, and in the moment. Knowledge-in-action is comprised of social norms, values, prejudices, experiences, and different forms of knowledge (Carr, 1989, see Anderson et al., 2004). Reflective practice is an approach to training and practice that can help people to access, make sense of, and learn from this knowledge-in-action, and in turn improve future practice (Anderson et al., 2004). The reported benefits of reflective practice in sport and exercise psychology include increasing awareness and understanding of knowledge-in-action, bridging the theory-practice gap, making sense of experiences, increasing self-awareness and supporting self-management, increasing accountability, evaluating practice, facilitating personal and professional growth, and supporting effective practice (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004; Cropley et al., 2010, 2023; Knowles et al., 2014a).

Reflective practice is embedded in sport and exercise psychology training in the United Kingdom. Recognising the importance of being a skilled reflective practitioner, the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP Stage 2) requires trainees to maintain a reflective diary throughout the qualification (BPS, 2018). Reflective diary assessments are also an essential source of information for judging a trainee’s competence, as they provide key evidence to assessors of the trainee’s development across the competencies and sub-competencies that broadly relate to professional standards and ethical practice (Key Role 1), consultancy (Key Role 2), research (Key Role 3), and communication (Key Role 4). Likewise, comparable qualifications use reflective diaries as important aspects of the learning and assessment processes. These comparable qualifications include the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences’ (BASES)

Sport and Exercise Psychology Applied Route (SEPAR), BASES Supervised Experience, professional doctorates in sport and exercise psychology (in the United Kingdom, these are at Glasgow Caledonian University, Liverpool John Moores University, and the University of Portsmouth) and international equivalents (e.g., the Association for Applied Sport Psychology's [AASP] Certified Mental Performance Consultant® [CMPC] certification program).

In this article, I offer 10 suggestions to support Trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologists and others on comparable training routes to strengthen the quality of their reflective practice diary: (1) Make reflective practice a key part of the Plan of Training; (2) Experiment with different reflective models; (3) Showcase your awareness and understanding of literature; (4) Pick meaningful objects of reflection; (5) Be open, honest, and self-critical; (6) Engage with some of your *current* challenges; (7) Make supervision visible; (8) Offer specific action points; (9) Re-visit reflections and engage with what happened next; and (10) Offer a sense of who you are as a practitioner. These 10 suggestions do not represent all qualities of good reflective practice, but instead they represent 10 pointers that resonate with my experience of assessing and providing feedback on over 50 reflective diary submissions of more than 20 Trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologists.

1. Make reflective practice a key part of the Plan of Training

Underpinning the next nine suggestions is the importance of engaging with reflective practice as a developmental activity towards the beginning of the Plan of Training. It is valuable to robustly study and learn about reflective practice and to gain supervisor feedback on reflections. Extensive reading is exceptionally valuable throughout QSEP Stage 2 (see my contribution in Eubank et al., 2019), and the sport and exercise psychology literature provides excellent guidance on how to approach reflective practice. Zoe Knowles and Brendan Cropley are among the excellent writers in this area (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004; Cropley et al., 2010, 2023; Knowles et al., 2007, 2014). The nursing, education, sport coaching, and psychotherapy and counselling literature also provide excellent guidance that applies well to sport and exercise psychology. There are also continued professional development (CPD) events relating to reflective practice. Trainees are encouraged to practice writing reflections

while following good practice principles (e.g., trying some of the suggestions in this article), and to gain formative feedback on their reflections through supervision.

2. Experiment with different reflective models

The QSEP Handbook for Candidates (BPS, 2018) encourages trainees to use an appropriate reflective practice model or framework to underpin their reflections, recognising that a model can support structured and deep reflections. There are numerous reflective models available such as Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, Johns' (1994) reflective model (for a sport adaptation, see Anderson et al., 2004), and Rolfe et al.'s (2001) 'What? Now what? So what?' reflective model (for a review of models, see Finlayson, 2015). Particularly within the first assessed reflective diary, it is valuable to see trainees experimenting with different models, while they try to find a model that works well for them. This experimentation can be complemented by a meaningful reflection on reflective practice (i.e., a 'meta-reflection') under Key Role 1, where the trainee explores what they learnt about the reflective process through their engagement with the different models.

3. Showcase your awareness and understanding of literature

Sport and exercise psychology is an evidence-based profession, and many experienced practitioners have also shared their good practice through professional practice pieces and textbooks (e.g., Fifer et al., 2008; McCormick et al., 2018; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Simons & Andersen, 1995). It is therefore valuable for trainees to demonstrate their awareness of literature and showcase how the sport and exercise psychology literature and related literature (e.g., psychotherapy and counselling) are informing professional practice. As some examples, help your assessor to answer some of these questions: How is the ethics literature informing ethical processes (e.g., the trainee's approach to confidentiality or boundaries) and how ethical dilemmas are dealt with? How does literature on evaluating practice influence how the trainee monitors their consultancy and evaluates its impact? How does literature on professional philosophy help the trainee to make sense of how they practice? How does psychotherapy and counselling literature inform how the trainee builds and maintains their relationships? How does literature on motivation inform how educational workshops

are run? How does psychological skills training literature inform educational interventions? And how does injury psychology literature inform how the trainee works with injured athletes and exercisers?

Trainees should not feel, however, that all their reflections must be underpinned by academic literature. In many cases, reflections can be deep and meaningful without links to literature. Instead, literature should be included when it fits organically and offers a meaningful contribution to the reflective process (BASES, 2021). However, there will be occasions where literature can help trainees to make sense of their research or consultancy experiences and guide future practice. In such cases, engaging with the literature in depth, as opposed to briefly with a superficial passing reference, is valuable.

4. Pick meaningful objects of reflection

The QSEP Handbook for Candidates (BPS, 2018) encourages trainees to reflect with more cognitive and emotional depth, to give assessors a comprehensive feel for the trainee's development. The varied nature of the sub-roles means that there are many potential topics for reflection, but some topics and experiences are more meaningful and lend themselves better to achieving cognitive and emotional depth. As assessors, we encourage trainees to focus on the 'big issues' or 'major challenges' encountered when consulting or researching that have driven, or could drive, the most meaningful learning. Some general examples are ethical dilemmas where you are unsure that the course of action is or was the morally ideal one, tensions in your professional philosophy (e.g., identifying as person-centred whilst wanting a directive structure or to offer evidence-based advice), interpersonal challenges with key individuals like coaches or research gatekeepers, situations where you wish you handled it differently, consultancy or research that is not going to plan, experiences that evoked emotion that you want to understand, or reflections on the inclusivity of your research or consultancy.

Reflective practice can serve functions that are technical (relating to standards, competencies, and mechanical aspects of practice, such as the extent to which a psychological skills training intervention reflected the evidence base), practical (exploring personal meaning in a situation, such as how the trainee's experiences as an athlete or exerciser impacted their interpretation of their

client's experience), or critical (examining the constraints of social, political, and economic factors on action, e.g., considering how the trainee's charging structure privileges the wealthy, see Anderson et al., 2004). Including technical, practical, and critical reflections throughout the diary submissions would be valuable, with more critical reflections (e.g., Knowles et al., 2012) likely capturing that the trainee is approaching full competence through QSEP. For example, trainees might critically engage with some of the contemporary literature relating to equality, diversity, and inclusion within sport and exercise psychology; the *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review* special editions (BPS, 2022a, 2022b) on equality, diversity, and inclusion would provide an excellent starting point.

5. Be open, honest, and self-critical

When I completed QSEP Stage 2 as a trainee, I worried about submitting reflections that captured my vulnerability (e.g., mistakes I made, my handling of ethical dilemmas), in case my assessor judged me as incompetent or unethical (see also Collins & McCann, 2014). In my experience as an assessor, though, reflections that are open, honest, and self-critical are often the most meaningful, as they capture opportunities to learn and develop. Assessors know consultancy can be 'messy', difficult, and not go to plan (for some of my own 'messy' applied work, see McCormick, 2014). Being willing to engage with self-doubt and emotion such as anxiety or guilt, to critically challenge your practice, to consider preferred ways of handling situations in the future, and to ask yourself the difficult questions (e.g., 'Is what I'm doing really making a difference? How can I be confident?' or 'How well is this data going to answer my research question?') can support meaningful learning and development. In my experience, the assessed reflective diary is a safe space—and often a constructive space, as assessors can offer comments and suggestions for future development—to engage with these issues.

6. Engage with some of your *current* challenges

Trainees often reflect on what they learnt from past experiences on QSEP, whether days ago or longer. It is less common to see trainees use reflection to solve a current problem or dilemma. For example, it is more common to see a trainee reflecting on how they handled a past ethical dilemma, as opposed to weighing up the pros and cons for different ways of handling a current ethical dilemma

to identify a morally ideal course of action; in relation to ethics, this has been called ethical reasoning (Rest, 1982; see BPS, 2015). As a result, they miss out on what the reflective process can offer the decision-making process. It is therefore valuable for trainees to use reflection to deal with some current challenges in their consultancy or their research, such as consultancy or research that is not going to plan or ongoing ethical dilemmas. When facing a current challenge, what are the different options for moving forward? What are the pros and cons of the different options? What barriers might you face after choosing these options, and how might you overcome them? What does literature suggest doing? What do peers and supervisors suggest doing? How can your ethical code and other professional publications guide you? After weighing up these options and their pros and cons, which option have you judged as being the best way forward? Later, linking to Suggestion 9, what was then learned from the process of planning and implementing a solution?

7. Make supervision visible

In the reflective diary, trainees demonstrate the processes they use to develop across the sub-roles personally and professionally, as well as how they deal with ethical dilemmas and professional challenges. As an important aspect of these processes, it is valuable to write about supervision experiences, and the associated learning, regularly and explicitly in the reflective diary. Help your assessor to answer some of these questions: How is supervision used to develop strong professional standards? How is supervision used as CPD or to identify CPD opportunities? How is supervision used when dealing with ethical dilemmas and professional challenges? How does the supervisor guide on different aspects of one-to-one consultancy, group work, or research activity, and what has been learnt from this guidance? What was learnt from the supervisor observing and providing feedback on the trainee's practice?

8. Offer specific action points

Trainees can demonstrate commitment to their learning and professional development by identifying how they will act upon their learning. This is typically encouraged by prompts in reflective models, such as the action plans prompts of Gibbs' (1988) or Johns' (1994) reflective models, or the

'Now what?' prompt of Rolfe et al.'s (2001) model. While weaker reflections might be vaguer or more general (e.g., 'Continue to engage with supervision', 'read widely'), stronger reflections will show that the trainee has identified a specific plan of action, perhaps engaging with SMART goal principles. Strong action plans might name papers to read, identify specific discussion points for supervision, identify CPD events to attend, or commit to a change in applied practice (e.g., a specific change to the needs analysis or intervention monitoring process), and they may name a timescale for action. What precisely do you intend to do? When do you intend to do it? How will you know when you have done it? What will your next step towards a longer-term goal be? What will your action plan 'look like'? Who will you be accountable to, and how will you be answerable them? How can following your action plan be evidenced to your supervisor and assessors (e.g., CPD certificate, written reflection on learning)?

9. Re-visit reflections and engage with what happened next

Identifying a specific action plan is important, but what was learnt from engaging with it? Did it go to plan, or were there unexpected barriers (and if so, what was learned from encountering these)? It can be valuable to present, perhaps in a subsequent reflection, what was learned from reading the named paper, engaging with the supervision discussion, attending the CPD event, or trying that something different in applied practice. Re-visiting the learning from the action point demonstrates commitment to the reflective process, as it captures how the first reflection genuinely impacted how the trainee approached their CPD or the way that they practice, and ultimately what they learned.

It can also be valuable to engage with 'staged' reflection, where an immediate reflection is followed by a delayed reflection (e.g., Knowles et al., 2012). This delayed reflection may lead to further insights or different perspectives of the experience, new interpretations, additional ideas for practice, and further learning. This delayed reflection could be supported by the trainee sharing their immediate reflection with their supervisors and peers, who could then prompt further reflection in a

'critical friend' manner (e.g., through summarising, reflecting back, questioning, offering alternative courses of action); this is an example of 'layered reflection' (e.g., Knowles et al., 2012).

10. Offer a sense of who you are as a practitioner

Finally, the QSEP Handbook for Candidates (BPS, 2018) asks that one of the trainee's consultancy reflections at each submission focuses on the development of their professional practice philosophy. However, with the sub-roles assessed by the reflective diary covering the consultancy process from intakes through to evaluation of effectiveness, there is an opportunity for the trainee to use the reflective diary to offer a strong sense of how they work and how their practice-based decisions are underpinned by their core beliefs, values, and theoretical approach (cf. Poczwardowski et al., 2004). In this way, reflections show the assessors (who are generally unfamiliar with trainees and their practice) how the trainee does sport and exercise psychology in practice, and the extent to which there is coherence between the trainee's stated philosophy and what they do. In strong submissions, assessors also value learning about the trainee's philosophy of research (i.e., the paradigmatic beliefs underpinning their research) and how it impacts the research process (Key Role 3), and about the trainee's philosophical approach to teaching and learning that underpins their educational activities (Key Role 4).

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