

# The Role of Reflective Practices in Developing Emotional and Social Intelligence

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effects of reflective practice in project-based learning on the development of emotional and social intelligence among undergraduate students. Conducted with 155 students enrolled in the Design Thinking course at UNITAR International University, the research analyzed students' reflective journals using thematic analysis. The findings reveal significant gains in emotional intelligence, such as self-awareness, confidence, fortitude, and emotional regulation, and social intelligence, including teamwork, empathy, communication and leadership. While both domains are enhanced, social intelligence emerges more significantly, highlighting the value of collaborative learning environments. The results support the integration of reflective and experiential approaches in higher education to foster students' holistic development. The study also recommends further exploration of the influence of digital learning, gender, cultural factors, and leadership roles on emotional and social competence. Overall, the findings affirm that reflective practice is an important tool for fostering interpersonal and intrapersonal growth that aligns with humanizing educational goals.

**Keywords:** Reflective Practice, Emotional Intelligence, Social Intelligence, Project-Based Learning, Higher Education

## Introduction

Humanizing education places a focus on developing the whole person to become intellectually, emotionally, socially, and ethically balanced. Reflective practice in the learning setting serves this purpose by encouraging students to think about their thoughts, emotions, and relationships. In Malaysian tertiary education, particularly in General Studies modules, incorporating careful reflection on real dilemmas can enhance emotional and social competencies, which are gaining value in scholarly and workplace settings.

Reflective practice has been established as a critical pedagogical approach for promoting deep learning and personal development. Reflective writing in higher education helps bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-life application, fostering a metacognitive awareness essential for professional growth (Sudirman et al., 2024). When embedded in

project-based or experiential learning, reflections encourage students to explore their identity, emotions, and values, enhancing self-regulation and critical thinking (Abilova et al., 2024; Khmelivska, 2024; Davis, 2022). While structured reflection has shown promise in improving emotional intelligence, it is essential to recognize that the outcomes may differ based on the specific context and methods employed. Some studies indicate that while empathy can improve, other aspects of emotional intelligence may require different approaches for enhancement (Imperato & Strano-Paul, 2021).

Emotional intelligence (EI) encompasses the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions while influencing the emotions of others. This skill is increasingly recognized as essential for personal and professional success, particularly in leadership roles. Self-awareness, self-control, empathy, social skills, and intrinsic motivation are all components of emotional intelligence (EI) (Wasswa, 2024). In order to improve interpersonal relationships, it is essential to identify and control emotions in both one and others (Nasution et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the ability to effectively comprehend, communicate, and collaborate with others is a component of social intelligence. It is essential for problem-solving and team-based activities. According to recent studies, students who work on group projects significantly improve their ability to take perspectives, be empathetic, and communicate collaboratively. Students' preparedness for the working world can be improved by using reflective journaling and structured feedback to improve their understanding and management of interpersonal relationships (Dutta et al., 2023).

In order to support the humanistic objectives of education, this study looks at how reflective practices within a project-based learning framework aid students in gaining a deeper understanding of both them and others.

This study is significant because it provides the missing empirical link between Malaysia's high-level commitment to humanising education and the everyday classroom practices that can turn aspiration into reality. By showing that the structured reflection embedded in project-based learning measurably enhances students' emotional and social intelligence, the research offers curriculum designers a concrete, scalable pedagogy for cultivating the graduate attributes most prized by employers, i.e. self-awareness, collaboration, and adaptability. The evidence generated will not only help universities justify investments in staff training and assessment redesign but also reassure industry partners that Malaysian graduates possess the socio-emotional skills needed for agile, cross-functional work. At the policy level, the findings supply data to inform future updates of the Malaysian Education Blueprint and related quality-assurance frameworks, while for academics, they open new paths to explore how reflective cycles shape affective competencies across cultures and over time.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to investigate how reflective practices help undergraduate students participating in project-based learning develop their emotional and social intelligence. The study intends to determine how these practices support interpersonal skills, empathy, and

personal insight—essential elements of holistic human development in higher education—by examining students' written reflections from a General Studies course.

This study's main goal is to investigate how reflective practices in project-based learning settings help students become more emotionally intelligent, especially in terms of identifying, comprehending, and controlling their own emotions. With an emphasis on fostering empathy, interpersonal communication, and teamwork, a second goal is to examine how reflection affects students' perceptions of social dynamics and collaboration. Finally, the study seeks to identify recurring patterns in students' reflective responses that signify broader holistic personal growth, aligning with the aspirations of humanizing education and the goals of Malaysian higher education reform.

### **Methodology**

The participants comprised 155 undergraduate students enrolled in a Design Thinking course at a UNITAR International University. This study used purposive sampling, specifically criterion-based selection among those participants who had engaged in project-based learning and submitted reflective journals as part of a Design Thinking course. These students were chosen because they were most likely to provide rich, relevant insights into how reflective practices contribute to emotional and social intelligence development.

The data collection instrument consisted of structured reflection questions with open-ended prompts such as *“What were some of the most interesting discoveries I made while working on this project? About the problem? About myself? About others?”*

Data were collected through written reflections submitted by the students as part of their course requirements. These reflections prompted students to critically analyse their learning experiences, group interactions, emotional responses, and personal growth. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution, and students were informed that their reflections might be used anonymously for research purposes.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and suitability in identifying recurring themes related to students' emotional and social development. Both inductive and deductive coding were used to organize responses into sub-themes aligned with the constructs of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Social Intelligence (SQ).

### **Findings and Discussion**

Analysis of 155 student reflections revealed clear patterns of personal and interpersonal growth. 84 students (54%) shared reflections aligned with Emotional Intelligence (EQ), while 117 students (75%) described experiences related to Social Intelligence (SQ). The remaining participants have no answer to the reflective questions. Six sub-themes were identified under each domain, supported by direct student quotes that illustrate their developmental insights.

Table 1 represents the analysis of EQ-related reflections on the core areas of emotional development experienced by students throughout the project.

Table 1

*EQ-related reflections on Design Thinking Project-Based Learning*

EQ Sub-theme	No. of Students	Example Quotes
Self-awareness / Discovering personal strengths	22	<i>"I didn't know I was this creative"</i> <i>"I found my hidden talents"</i>
Increased self-confidence	18	<i>"I became more confident"</i> <i>"I believed in myself"</i>
Perseverance / Not giving up easily	15	<i>"Even though it was hard, I pushed through and finished it"</i>
Emotional regulation under pressure	12	<i>"I learned to manage stress and deadlines"</i>
Reflection and personal growth	10	<i>"This helped me understand myself better"</i>
Resilience in facing challenges	7	<i>"Some groupmates were inactive, but I kept going"</i>

The most frequently mentioned theme was self-awareness and the discovery of personal strengths, noted by 22 students, who shared realizations about their hidden talents, creativity, and inner capabilities. Closely following this, 18 students expressed experiences of increased self-confidence, as they became more assured in their ability to contribute meaningfully to group work and problem-solving tasks.

Another significant theme was perseverance or the determination not to give up, reported by 15 students, especially in the face of academic or interpersonal challenges. Additionally, 12 students described experiences of emotional regulation under pressure, reflecting their ability to manage stress, deadlines, and frustration during group collaboration. A more introspective theme, reflection and personal growth, emerged in the responses of 10 students, who acknowledged how the project allowed them to better understand themselves and their emotional responses. Finally, 7 students highlighted resilience in facing challenges, especially when dealing with uncooperative teammates or unforeseen obstacles. Together, these sub-themes illustrate how the learning experience not only enhanced cognitive and technical abilities but also significantly supported the development of emotional intelligence among the students.

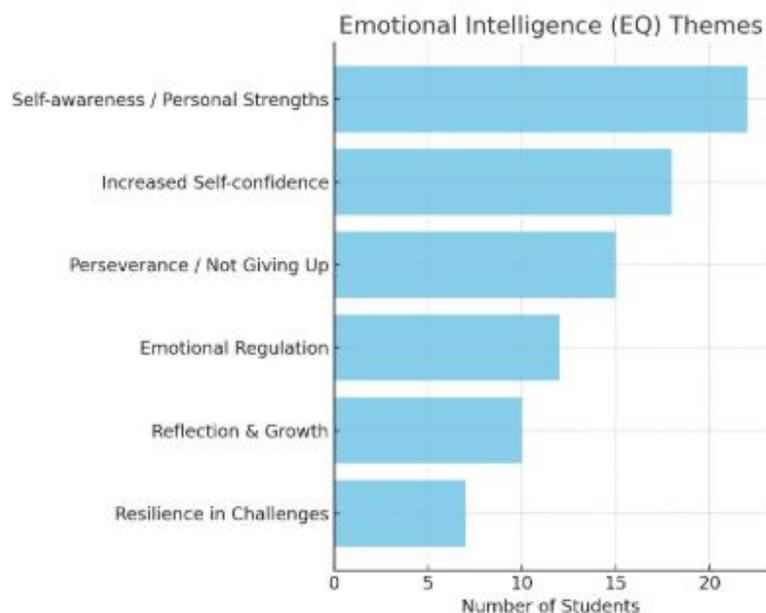


Figure 1: Frequency of Student Responses on EQ Theme

Meanwhile, on Social Intelligence (SQ) development, out of the 155 student reflections analyzed, 117 students (approximately 75%) provided insights which refers to the ability to understand and manage relationships and interact effectively with others. From these responses, six key sub-themes also emerged, illustrating the range of interpersonal growth experienced by students during their group-based learning tasks (Table 2).

Table 2

*SQ-related reflections on Design Thinking Project-Based Learning*

SQ Sub-theme	No. of Students	Example Quotes
Teamwork and collaboration	34	<i>"Teamwork is important"</i> <i>"We supported each other as a team"</i>
Empathy towards users or group members	25	<i>"I put myself in their shoes"</i> <i>"I understood others' struggles"</i>
Respect for differing opinions	20	<i>"Everyone had unique ideas"</i> <i>"I learned to value others' input"</i>
Effective communication in teams	18	<i>"I improved my communication"</i> <i>"Easier to discuss openly"</i>
Leadership and group management	11	<i>"I learned how to guide and understand my group as a leader"</i>
Handling uncooperative members empathetically	9	<i>"Some didn't contribute, but I tried to understand their situation"</i>

The most prominent theme was teamwork and collaboration, cited by 34 students, who emphasized the importance of working collectively to achieve shared goals and solve problems. This was followed by empathy towards users or group members (25 students), where students described their ability to understand others' perspectives and emotional states, particularly in diverse teams or when designing user-centered solutions. Additionally, 20 students reported developing respect for differing opinions, recognizing the value of diverse ideas and learning to appreciate alternative viewpoints during discussions.

Furthermore, effective communication in teams was highlighted by 18 students, many of whom noted improvements in expressing their thoughts clearly and listening actively. Leadership and group management skills were mentioned by 11 students, especially those who had taken on leadership roles and had to navigate decision-making, delegation, and group motivation. Lastly, 9 students described handling uncooperative team members with empathy, demonstrating patience and understanding when peers struggled to contribute. When taken as a whole, these reflections highlight the ways in which cooperative, problem-based learning settings can foster critical social skills that promote academic achievement as well as personal and professional preparedness.

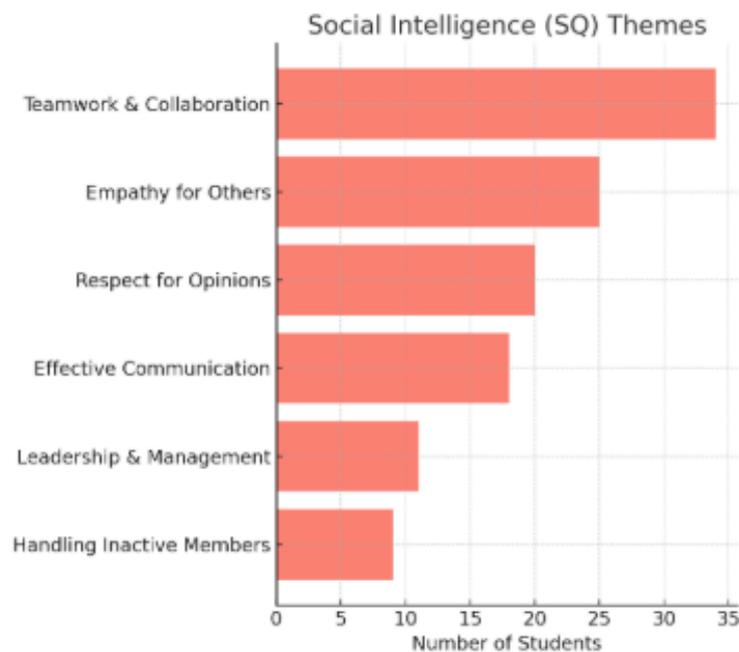


Figure 2: Frequency of Student Responses on SQ Theme

The scope and depth of the students' interpersonal and personal development throughout the project are highlighted in the Category Summary for Social Intelligence (SQ) and Emotional Intelligence (EQ). About 80 students reflected themes related to EQ, and about 95 students displayed themes related to SQ, according to the thematic coding (Table 3). This suggests that social intelligence seemed to predominate in students' reflections, despite the fact that both domains were significantly present.

Table 3

Summary Distribution of Students' Reflections by Emotional and Social Intelligence Categories

Category	Approximate No. of Students
Emotional Intelligence (EQ)	~80 students
Social Intelligence (SQ)	~95 students

The increased occurrence of SQ themes indicates that the project's collaborative format offered ample opportunity for students to interact with others, hone their teamwork skills, and cultivate empathy. It depicts the fact that students were constantly negotiating social

dynamics, including communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution, which helped them become aware of how to work well in groups. On the other hand, although somewhat fewer, EQ-related reflections still demonstrated significant personal growth. Students learned about their resilience, became more aware of their emotional strengths and weaknesses, and developed self-assurance in their capacity to overcome obstacles.

Overall, this overview demonstrates that the project experience provided a platform for the development of soft skills, particularly in the affective domain, and went beyond academic or technical learning. According to the findings, reflective and group-based learning should be incorporated into higher education because these experiences foster intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, both of which are essential for students' overall development.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Both social intelligence (SQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ) were greatly enhanced by the project-based learning experience, according to the thematic analysis of student reflections. Students improved their self-awareness, emotional control, empathy, communication, and teamwork skills in addition to gaining technical knowledge and problem-solving abilities. The increased frequency of Social Intelligence (SQ) themes indicates that the project's collaborative component significantly influenced the development of students' interpersonal skills. As students developed their confidence, found their own strengths, and showed tenacity under duress, their emotional intelligence (EQ) was also noticeably enhanced. According to these results, reflective and experiential learning settings significantly support students' overall development and are consistent with the educational objectives of the 21st century.

Future studies could examine the effects of digital learning environments on students' growth in social and emotional intelligence. Examining how students' capacity for empathy, effective communication, and emotional regulation is impacted by the absence of in-person interaction, dependence on digital tools, and virtual collaboration is crucial as online and hybrid learning models gain popularity. Teachers can create virtual learning experiences that are more emotionally responsive and engaging by looking into these dynamics.

Researchers should also think about looking into how gender and cultural background influence how EQ and SQ are expressed and develop. Gender expectations and cultural norms may have an impact on how students handle conflict or leadership, collaborate with others, and perceive emotions. More inclusive teaching strategies that promote the social and emotional growth of diverse student populations can be informed by a deeper comprehension of these variances.

Lastly, the influence of leadership positions in student group projects may be the subject of future research. Taking on leadership roles may hasten the development of decision-making, empathy, emotional control, and conflict-resolution abilities. Examining the ways in which leadership experiences foster the development of EQ and SQ can offer important insights into how to organize team-based learning to support comprehensive personal and professional growth.

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