

Reflective insights on navigating the research process in higher education during a health crisis

Caribbean
Educational
Research Journal

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Received 23 June 2025
Revised 4 September 2025
Accepted 17 November 2025

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to critically reflect on navigating higher education research during the first two years of the COVID-19 crisis, using an integrated framework of reflective models to sustain research integrity amidst disruption.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design entailed an autoethnographic approach applying Schön's reflection-in-action, Elliott's self-reflective spiral and King & Kitchener's reflective judgment model to the author's lived research journey, supported by reflexive journaling.

Findings – Some of the key challenges highlighted include university closures, fieldwork constraints, mental health issues and technology hurdles. Some of the adaptive strategies included methodological shifts, virtual collaboration, iterative writing and self-care. All of which were geared towards enabling continued productivity and resilience.

Practical implications – Provides researchers with structured reflective tools to adapt methodologies, manage remote collaboration and prioritize mental health during systemic disruption.

Social implications – The integrated reflective framework offers transferable insights for scholars navigating future crises. Plus, it advocates for a more compassionate, adaptable research culture that recognizes emotional and cognitive dimensions of scholarly work during crises.

Originality/value – Originality stems from the fact that it highlights applying a hybrid reflective framework (Schön, Elliott and King) to the research process itself during a health crisis, offering a methodical approach for sustaining academic integrity under extreme uncertainty.

Keywords Research journey, Strategy, Crisis, COVID-19, Reflective

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered life and livelihoods, triggering transformations across all sectors and within societies. Higher education is one such sector that suffered as colleges and universities closed, leaving students, staff and faculty confined to their homes during the lockdown periods. Facing uncertainty, I turned to academic writing to focus my time, gain clarity and fill a void. I see it as a form of lifelong learning, which [Stevenson \(2020\)](#) suggests prepares us for fast-paced change. This personal initiative was also a response to the compounded pressure to meet institutional expectations for professional development and educational quality ([Meijer, Geijssels, Kuijpers, Boei, & Vrieling, 2016](#)).

Research has well-established the significant psychological toll of pandemics, which includes increased anxiety, stress, depression and post-traumatic symptoms ([Gismero-González et al., 2020](#); [Yip, Cheung, Chau, & Law, 2010](#); [Wheaton et al., 2012](#)). These mental health challenges, as noted by [Gismero-González et al. \(2020, p. 6\)](#), manifest as “panic, anger, disappointment, sleep problems and disturbances in circadian rhythms,” profoundly impacting all aspects of life. This literature confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic created a context ripe for such adverse psychological effects, a reality that forms the critical backdrop for this autoethnographic study.

Faced with this documented potential for psychological distress, I consciously turned to academic writing as a strategic and therapeutic intervention ([Lee, 2020](#)). This decision was also informed by the view of [Sakurai and Chughtai \(2020\)](#) that pandemics and other natural disasters are significant events for examining human responses to disruption. My approach



Caribbean Educational Research Journal
© Emerald Publishing Limited
2978-6177
DOI 10.1108/CERJ-04-2026-0007

involved a deliberate focus on observing societal and individual behaviors during the crisis, using academic writing as a tool to process these observations and gain clarity. This practice aligns with the concept of learning from experience through reflection (Boud & Walker, 1990), positioning my writing not merely as a personal coping mechanism but as a method of inquiry into the crisis environment.

This autoethnographic article explores reflective practice models used by academics and professionals. This paper is guided by the following research question: How can an integrated framework of reflective models enable academic researchers to navigate systemic crises and sustain research integrity? I explore this question by analyzing my personal journey during the COVID-19 pandemic, detailing the challenges faced and the adaptive strategies developed through reflective practice. It aims to apply these models by integrating concepts from Schön (1983, 1991) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, Elliott (1991) revised Lewin's self-reflective spiral and King and Kitchener's (1994) model of reflective judgment, to critically examine my own research journey during the pandemic. The goal is to contribute a structured, reflective framework for conducting research under difficult conditions, providing scholars with practical tools to enhance their writing practices through deliberate reflection. As such, this work contributes to crisis research methodology by advocating for autoethnography to address affective challenges, proposing a hybrid reflective framework for scholar well-being and linking reflective practice to resilience, thereby fostering a more considerate and adaptable research culture beyond the immediate crisis.

Literature review

Reflective practice is significant across various fields, including nursing, medicine, engineering, social sciences, sport sciences and teaching. This literature review explores its benefits and applications through a reflective lens.

Schön (1983, 1991) introduced reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurs during an activity, involving real-time adjustments and decisions guided by tacit knowledge. Reflection-on-action happens post-activity, involving analysis and deriving insights. Researchers should incorporate both types into their writing process, pausing to reflect during (reflection-in-action) and after (reflection-on-action) their work. Edwards (2017) expands this to include reflection-before, reflection-in, reflection-on and reflection-beyond-action, offering a holistic understanding that improves professional practice and patient care in nursing. Olteanu (2017) highlights reflection-for-action in mathematics education, aiding lesson planning.

Elliott (1991) revised Lewin's (1952) self-reflective spiral, emphasizing iterative cycles of self-reflection. This model involves observing, reflecting, planning, acting and evaluating. Researchers should gather data and literature (observe), analyze observations (reflect), plan their manuscript (plan), write incorporating insights (act) and critically review and refine their work (evaluate). Pang (2022) suggests that reflective practices in teacher education generate a reflective spiral, enhancing teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Burns, Edwards, and Ellis (2022) argue that the self-reflective spiral guides educators in action research, promoting ongoing learning and improvement.

King and Kitchener (1994) developed a judgment model outlining cognitive development stages for reasoning and making judgments on ill-structured problems. The seven stages are grouped into three categories: pre-reflective thinking, quasi-reflective thinking and reflective thinking.

(1) Pre-reflective Thinking (Stages 1–3):

- Stage 1: Knowledge is considered absolute and requires no justification.
- Stage 2: Individuals assume that knowledge is absolutely certain and either possessed by authority figures or temporarily unavailable.

- Stage 3: Here, knowledge is seen as either absolutely certain or temporarily uncertain. Judgments are influenced by personal opinions.

(2) Quasi-Reflective Thinking (Stages 4 and 5):

- Stage 4: Knowledge is recognized as uncertain, and ambiguity is inherent. Arguments and evidence supporting this knowledge are idiosyncratic.
- Stage 5: Subjectivity and context specificity come into play. Individuals acknowledge that other theories could be as true as their own, based on different evidence.

(3) Reflective Thinking (Stages 6 and 7):

- Stage 6: Knowledge is seen as an outcome of a process where different solutions, evidence and perspectives are evaluated.
- Stage 7: The highest level involves sophisticated reflective thinking. Individuals can coordinate evidence and arguments across contexts, creating a more integrated system of knowledge.

In summary, while distinct, these models are complementary for analyzing the research process during a crisis. Schön's reflection-in-action provides a lens for examining real-time, adaptive decision-making. Elliott's self-reflective spiral offers a structured, iterative cycle for planning and evaluating actions over time. King's reflective judgment model frames the cognitive development required to reason through complex, ill-structured problems. Together, they form a multi-faceted theoretical framework for understanding how a researcher adapts cognitively, procedurally and ethically in a disruptive environment. Additionally, in a more recent study, [Milner and Wolfer \(2023\)](#) highlight the reflective judgment model's value in social work, promoting self-reflection, ethical problem-solving and engagement with complex dilemmas. While, adaptive structuration theory examines technology's impact on research during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing communication and technology adoption dynamics ([Schmitz et al., 2016](#); [Schmid & Dowling, 2022](#)). This theory provides a valuable framework for understanding my experiences adopting new digital tools and restructuring team communication. It explains how my collaborative structures evolved in response to technological constraints and opportunities, a process analyzed through my reflective practice.

Methodological approach

This paper sets out to delineate my research practices using a qualitative reflective approach, specifically aligning with the traditions of autoethnography and self-study. This methodological choice is justified as it allows for a deep, contextualized analysis of personal experience to understand broader cultural phenomena (in this case, academic research during a global crisis). The foundation of this inquiry was laid through consistent reflexive journaling maintained throughout the pandemic period. The primary subject of analysis is my own lived experience as a researcher navigating the pandemic. While I observe and comment on the challenges faced by colleagues and the broader academic community, these observations serve as a contextual backdrop to enrich the understanding of my personal reflective journey. This practice created a detailed chronicle of the research experience, capturing not only practical challenges and adaptations but also the emotional and cognitive dimensions of scholarly work during disruption. These journals served as living documents that preserved the raw material of the research journey in real time.

The analytical process began with a deep immersion in my personal accounts, reading and re-reading the entries to identify significant moments and patterns. Through an iterative process of reflection, initial impressions gradually coalesced into meaningful themes that

captured the essence of navigating research during a crisis. These emergent items formed the conceptual bridge between my personal experiences and established theoretical frameworks.

The models were then applied to critically examine my experiences, actions and decision-making during my research process in the COVID-19 environment. By integrating concepts from Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, Elliott's self-reflective spiral and King's model of reflective judgment. This theoretical integration allowed for a sophisticated examination of how crisis conditions reshape research practices, while simultaneously testing the applicability of these reflective models in extreme circumstances. The result is a methodological approach that honors the complexity of lived experience while maintaining scholarly rigor, creating a transparent pathway from personal narrative to theoretical contribution.

Further, the research aims to provide other scholars with practical tools to enhance their research writing practices through reflection. Lessons and learning experiences are based on my health-related knowledge, attitudes and skill sets grounded in higher education administration in general business and healthcare management. The paper closes by offering insights for other researchers experiencing similar issues and provides some guidance to assist others in engaging in research.

Facing an evolving context for conducting research

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted the research landscape, transforming it from a familiar environment into a space of unprecedented constraint and complexity. Where maintaining the status quo was once sufficient, the new realities of funding shortages, ethical quandaries around remote data collection and the urgent need for technological adaptation demanded a proactive and reflective approach to avoid academic stagnation. As a faculty member and researcher, I engaged in continuous reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) to strategize and adapt my research techniques to overcome these complexities and resource disparities. There was no simple or uniform approach to conducting research during this period. Ensuring academic quality and relevance of articles was crucial, as was making studies adaptable to diverse teaching and learning contexts.

This pressure to persist was intensified by the inescapable "publish or perish" ethos, a source of significant anxiety that resonates with the findings of Brew, Boud, Namgung, Lucas, and Crawford (2016) on the strains of research productivity. My experience confirmed that this pressure is not merely professional but deeply personal, aligning with scholarship that recognizes the important role of researchers' emotions (Cylwik, 2001). The pandemic amplified emotional challenges, frustration with stalled projects, loneliness from physical isolation and apprehension about the future that are well-documented in research (Nutov & Hazzan, 2011; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liangputtong, 2009). These were not abstract concepts but daily realities, exacerbated by the collapsing boundary between work and home. The struggle to achieve a work-life balance became a central challenge, as the risk of overexertion and burnout, discussed by Favero and Health (2012) and Dyrbye and Shanafelt (2016), felt increasingly imminent.

Therefore, my research journey during the crisis became as much about managing these emotional and professional pressures as it was about methodological adaptation. The strategies I developed, detailed in the following sections, were not merely technical fixes but essential mechanisms for reclaiming a sense of agency. They were my way of mitigating helplessness, promoting control and ensuring that I could continue to contribute meaningfully to my field despite the profound disruption.

Path to personal journey - challenges faced and strategies

Several challenges made it difficult to conduct research during COVID-19. The main causes of these challenges stemmed from the lockdown, social distancing measures and social

protection policies that became the order of the day. In general, as a professor, I am evaluated mainly on my research and publications, teaching effectiveness and service. This section discusses the part of my journey focused primarily on research and publications. I explore the challenges faced under four key sub-headings: closure of the university to personnel, fieldwork constraints, mental health issues and technology hurdles. These challenges are analyzed through the integrated lens of the three reflective models.

Closure of the university to personnel

The closure of universities worldwide during COVID-19 was a major challenge to performing duties as an academic. As my university went on temporary lockdown for a year and then phased back in with a hybrid period before returning to an acceptable state of normalcy of operations. This disruption impacted my ability to function as a researcher. For instance, this interfered with ongoing experiments and hindered data collection (see section on addressing fieldwork constraints). My initial strategy, born from reflection-on-action after the first weeks of lockdown, was to motivate and encourage other members of my research team to work remotely with minimal supervision over the first six months of lockdown. This evolved through an iterative cycle (Elliott, 1991); I set up virtual meetings to discuss ongoing projects, troubleshoot issues and plan future steps, which allowed me to reflect-in-action during these sessions and gradually regain a functional structure for the research process. Some researchers emphasize the value of having a collaborative culture of inquiry to boost professional research development (Cantalini-Williams *et al.*, 2015; DeLuca, Bolden, & Chan, 2017; Verhoef, Volman, & Gaikhorst, 2022). I found it easy to get support for mentorship, expert opinions and editing activities. However, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and financial support process were much more difficult in maneuvering pass a series of hurdles, bureaucracy, time constraints and conflicting guidelines; a similar consensus came from Ghooi (2014).

The combination of the closure of universities, the shutting of borders and limited airline travel meant that attending conferences to showcase research was halted during this period. Reflecting on this disruption, I recognized a significant personal and professional challenge, as I view conferences as an investment in self and my future. In addition, my view is that conferences allow for recognition in the field, meeting other experts and gaining expert feedback from presentations that can be incorporated into journal manuscripts. In my case, I did miss one pre-booked conference due to canceled travel. This challenge was exacerbated by the fact that the booking may not be eligible for refund or rebooking. In another instance, I attended an online livestreamed conference that allowed for remote participation. This session was not ideal as it had technical glitches that impeded the session and became painful to endure. Based on some of the experiences of others in this and similar sessions, it was thought that you should upgrade bandwidth for good internet connectivity and also upgrade your hardware and software to enhance chances of compatibility with common online meeting platforms.

Other researchers suggest that the closure disrupted research schedules, delaying experiments, data collection and analysis. Shah (2020) suggested that the restricted access to physical resources at universities hindered the pace of research progress, with similar sentiments being experienced by me. In addition, I and other researchers purport that the sudden shift to online teaching and research demanded additional time and effort. While García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, and Martín-Rojas (2021) suggest that juggling teaching, administrative tasks and research posed greater challenges during the pandemic as the support coming from within the institutional walls had diminished. Further, researchers suggest the need for rapid adaptation and preparedness, emphasizing the importance of robust emergency response plans (Crawford, 2023). Having such a plan is supported by me; however, I accept that though a plan can guide emergency responses, personnel and resources preclude such actions.

Through integrating Schön's real-time reflection, I was able to empower myself, draw upon my expertise and adapt swiftly to make informed decisions during the transition. Elliott's self-reflective spiral provided a structured cycle for planning virtual meetings (plan/act), evaluating their effectiveness (evaluate) and refining our remote collaboration strategies (observe/reflect) over time. King's reflective judgment was crucial in reasoning through the complex, ill-structured problem of navigating institutional bureaucracy and ethical guidelines with limited resources, moving beyond pre-reflective frustration to a more reasoned evaluation of options.

The reopening process of the university was instituted with some constraints, which were deemed reasonable as many other universities around the world had similar policies. For instance, it was stated by Loop News (April 16, 2021) that "part of our plan for a safe return to campus life, COVID-19 vaccinations will be required for all students, faculty, staff, and administrators, vendors and visitors on campus." However, this guiding principle was a challenge as quite a few categories of the citizenry in the host country were exhibiting vaccine hesitancy.

Fieldwork constraints

Many restrictions were placed on how fieldwork could be administered. Challenges in collecting quality and structured primary data led to choosing secondary data as the key source for exploring research areas. Through a process of reflective judgment (King & Kitchener, 1994), I evaluated the ill-structured problem of data collection during a lockdown and concluded that qualitative research was preferable in the context of COVID-19, reasoning that it provides a rich, contextualized understanding of the pandemic's impact on human life, which is essential for crafting appropriate responses at both individual and societal levels. Not being able to access external grant funding and other means of financial support led to limited information sources. I took data collection seriously from the beginning, as selecting the best data collection method is the crux of exploring and answering research questions. Engaging in reflection-on-action, I recognized that some fieldwork constraints were linked to academic norms, disciplinary rules and institutional structures; all these practices influenced my research choices (e.g. research questions, methodologies and citation styles). This realization, processed through Elliott's spiral, led me to modify my research questions to accommodate the limitations as a planned action to move the project forward. In addition, temporary shifts from field-based studies to more theoretical or conceptual work were employed. I took the opportunity to pursue virtual fieldwork where possible. I interviewed experts remotely and collaborated with local affiliates through video conferencing. Consideration was also given to time and temporality during COVID-19, especially as decisions were influenced by the temporal unfolding of structures (e.g. managing methodological contingencies, uncertainty of community engagement and reframing work to fit special issue demands of journals). Delayed fieldwork allowed for regrouping and adjusting timelines.

Another challenge was the restricted opportunities to discuss concepts, findings and analysis with colleagues, especially as they now had an increased mental load and pandemic fatigue. Eva (2021) purports that the COVID-19 crisis has impacted different people and their organizations in different ways and further highlights the importance of understanding the local reality. The public health interventions of isolation, quarantining, social distancing and community containment protocols made it difficult for direct face-to-face communication between students, staff and faculty (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). The COVID-19 environment has made the way we work and interact more challenging in many ways. For instance, effective communication is one area that has suffered immensely during this period. As a means of improving communication in this new era of masking and social distancing, I utilized more phone apps and online means of communicating; for instance, MS Teams and Zoom. I also asked that people reach out to me and offer advice wherever they can in the research, thus creating a tolerable, time-intensive response process. This approach allowed

persons to contribute in modest, meaningful ways to the research using less detailed comments; highlighting potential areas of improvement and providing general advice on moving the research process forward. Thus, allowing for some insightful and helpful remarks, which are an essential iterative aspect to improving the manuscript.

A further challenge was having the ability to submit applications to access grants and fellowships. During the COVID-19 period, my schedule became more hectic with meetings, appointments and other duties that required immediate action. Thus, dedicating time and energy beyond my typical workload to prepare a comprehensive and concise grant proposal was as a daunting task. To overcome the challenge the approach used entailed selecting potential grants wisely and narrowing the focus of the research. Working in partnerships and aligning myself with other like-minded colleagues or suitable collaborating institutions made preparing submissions easier and stronger. Through a continuous process of agency and reflection, I was able to reflect on their practices, act intentionally, adapt to changing norms, negotiate around the structural constraints and make practical choices informed by this ongoing self-reflection. By looking inward at my research process, I was able to better understand the structural influences.

Other researchers like [Tremblay et al. \(2021\)](#) in a study identified two major challenges in conducting qualitative research during COVID-19, namely time constraints and physical distancing; both of which I experienced at various stages of my research. [Krause et al. \(2021\)](#), in their article, suggest adjusting and continuing research despite the pandemic disruptions. . .proposing contingency planning, taking advantage of the technology and building partnerships. For me, contingency planning and adopting technology were much easier than trying to build partnerships. My view is that people kept to their safe zones and known relationships during COVID-19. [Singh \(2022\)](#) indicated that due to lockdowns and social distancing, face-to-face fieldwork became impossible and as such revealed that students and supervisors had to adapt quickly to virtual platforms for fieldwork activities. This challenge and strategy were common in my research journey as well.

Insights from the three models were integral to addressing fieldwork constraints. Schön's reflection-in-action allowed for real-time adjustments during remote interviews, such as building rapport digitally. As stipulated by Elliott's spiral, I was able to acknowledge the constraints (observe), process their impact (reflect), plan alternative approaches like shifting to theoretical work or secondary data (plan) and implement these changes (act). King's model was essential for exercising reflective judgment in evaluating the validity and ethical implications of these new methodological choices, moving from the uncertainty of Stage 4 to the evidence-based evaluation of Stage 6.

Mental health issues

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect storm for the creation of mental health issues in the workplace and academia has not been spared its wrath. There is no doubt that mental health issues have risen to higher levels than pre- COVID-19. The usual mental health issues observed in the workplace were bouts of anxiety, depression and stress. Despite using research as a means of overcoming mental health issues, I remained cognizant of the lingering double-edged sword that I and others on research projects faced due to the stigma attached. For me, stress was the number one factor and it mainly stemmed from being part of unknown circumstances which gave a feeling of being defenseless. However, I recognized the need for additional skills to lead research projects and related members safely into the future. Thus, making a case for finding the right work-life balance, which entailed juggling several demands and duties. I contend that exercising and having supportive people in your life is essential for stress management. By being proactive, I believe that it allowed me to take advantage of my awareness of the current crisis situation and to put action steps in place to make better use of my time, improve my work ethos and effectively achieve my professional and personal goals.

My personal experience resonates with scholarship suggesting that professors and researchers can draw parallels from mental health challenges faced by professionals on the front lines. Researchers reveal that the constant pressure to balance personal and professional life, coupled with the need for productivity, impacts their mental health and overall well-being. In a study published by [Hammoudi Halat et al. \(2023\)](#), the prevalence of anxiety, depression, stress and burnout among faculty across various academic fields and career stages. The factors influencing faculty mental health including work-related stress, workload and the changing landscape of higher education institutions. While this research provides a framework that aligns with my experiential findings, the precise degree of disruption and the efficacy of support mechanisms are likely contingent on individual contextual factors.

Navigating mental health challenges during research was demanding, but insights from the three reflective models supported valuable strategies. For instance, reflecting-in-action (Schön) during the research process allowed me to recognize emotional cues and create adaptive responses, such as taking breaks or seeking support. The iterative nature of Elliott's spiral encouraged regular check-ins on well-being as part of the evaluation phase, prompting adjustments to research approaches to reduce stress. King's model underpinned the cognitive process of recognizing the inherent uncertainty of the situation (quasi-reflective thinking) and making a reasoned judgment to prioritize self-care as a necessary condition for sustainable research, rather than a personal failing.

Technology hurdles

COVID-19 brought to the fore a series of technological challenges, which were compounded by a need for accelerating the digitization within university settings. With the increase in remote working and/or collaboration, the issues became greater to manage. For instance, the reduction in library services was a challenge during the COVID-19 period. The lack of availability of library staff capable of assisting with searches made it very difficult to collate information for research. I spent additional time searching for and using gratis access journals that were online. Such journals allowed for wider article access to researchers like me as it made data available to anyone with internet access. Not being able to freely collaborate or connect with other colleagues or potential interviewees for discussion and responses in a timely fashion was also a stumbling block, especially with getting in-depth information to queries. Other challenges stemmed from technology limitations and digital access. I found that online meetings were more demanding, suffered from unanticipated service interruptions, people were not as focused and were invariably distracted by their surroundings and thus the meetings were less effective in many ways. To adapt, I enhanced my capabilities by attending virtual training on remote communication best practices and adopting collaborative tools like Slack, Zoom, MS Teams and project management software, which improved project coordination.

To enhance my capabilities, I attended virtual training sessions on communication tools and platforms. In these sessions, facilitators shared best practices for working remotely and communicating effectively in a COVID-19 environment. I also adopted collaborative tools like Slack, Zoom, MS Teams and project management software. These facilitated communication and project coordination.

While my situation with technology hurdles was not unique, my personal reflective experience diverged from some findings in the literature. For instance, contrary to my experiences, [Dodds and Hess \(2020\)](#) suggest that online interviews were shorter and more meaningful. Alternatively, my research process and the judgments I made within it better aligned with the experiences of [Wenz and Keusch \(2023\)](#), who purport the value of establishing trust over the phone and investing time in building rapport by explaining the project and data collection process to participants. In addition, I was part of team meetings that faced several technical challenges (e.g. sound problems, connection problems, login issues, file upload and sharing, etc.).

In a quest to overcome technology hurdles, the application of adaptive structuration theory allowed me to focus on appropriate and adaptable technology structures to fit my needs. Furthermore, the reflective models provided a framework for adaptation. Schön's reflection-in-action was critical for troubleshooting technical issues in real-time during virtual meetings. Elliott's spiral guided a structured approach: observing what tools worked, reflecting on why certain platforms failed, planning to adopt new software or protocols and implementing these changes. King's model facilitated reflective judgment in evaluating the reliability of information gathered through new digital means and making reasoned decisions about which technological adaptations were most effective and ethically sound for my specific research context.

Review of the models synergies, limitations and workflow integration

The integrated use of Schön, Elliott and King & Kitchener's models created a synergistic framework for navigating the crisis. Their overlap is evident where Schön's "reflection-in-action" provided the real-time responsiveness that drove Elliott's iterative spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This cyclical process, in turn, generated the complex, ill-structured problems, such as ethical dilemmas in virtual fieldwork, that necessitated the reasoned, evidence-based judgment described in King's model. This intersection creates a holistic reflexivity, moving from immediate adaptation to strategic and justified decision-making.

Despite their utility, these models presented some key limitations. Their concurrent application can be cognitively demanding during a crisis, potentially causing reflective paralysis instead of promoting agile action. Furthermore, they heavily rely on the researcher's capacity to act independently and initiate change. This focus risks underestimating immovable systemic barriers, such as institutional bureaucracy or a lack of resources, which personal reflection alone cannot overcome. Therefore, a more methodical approach is necessary. A purpose-built holistic framework would scaffold these models into a structured yet flexible process, ensuring reflection is both rigorous and actionable. This would provide a critical toolkit for sustaining research integrity and personal resilience amidst profound disruption.

Personal experience with designing a methodical approach to research in COVID-19 environment

In this section, I set out to describe the steps in the research process through my personal experience. Basically, the research I conducted during this period used the approach of a narrative review or expert viewpoint-style research papers. My methodological choice was guided by reflective judgment; I determined that narrative reviews would be most useful for obtaining a broad perspective on a topic, which was appropriate given the exploratory nature of my inquiry during the crisis. Narrative inquiry allows for piecing together a story with a unique perspective and presents a richer understanding of the situation (Bamberg, 2012; Figgou & Paviopoulos, 2015). I see the expert viewpoint as a way for persons to describe the meaning and the significant value of the topic under discussion. Traditionally, research follows a sequential flow, going from stage to stage (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For instance, a possible sequence may be: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and analysis and conclusion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable increase in the publication of narrative reviews and expert viewpoint papers. The urgency of the pandemic demanded swift dissemination of information. Narrative reviews and expert viewpoints allowed researchers and experts to share insights rapidly. Unlike systematic reviews, which require extensive data collection and rigorous analysis, narrative reviews and expert opinions could be produced more quickly. In addition, the rapidly evolving nature of COVID-19 meant that traditional research methodologies struggled to keep pace.

Due to the novelty of preparing the research on a topic interlinked to COVID-19, while experiencing the raft of challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, contextually this situation made a great difference in how the work activities were performed. The approach of narrative reviews and expert viewpoints provided flexibility. In reflection, the research process adopted a non-sequential back-and-forth manner which allowed for continuous improvement for all the stages of the research. This iterative approach was fundamentally driven by reflection-in-action; I could adapt my content based on emerging evidence, changing guidelines and real-world experiences. Williams and Kaufman (2022) suggest that traditional research methods do not typically embrace such a flexible format where researchers address urgent questions without waiting for exhaustive data collection or a prolonged peer review process. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) stated that the true value in iteration is the continuous revisiting of information and linking it to emerging insights. This process invariably leads to greater focus and understanding of the phenomenon. It was noted that the stages were not mutually exclusive and entailed a significant overlap of closely related activities. Thus, at each stage, I had to give thought to the preceding and subsequent stages in the process, as shown in Figure 1. This created an iterative approach to writing the research papers in a back-and-forth manner, based on the fact that new knowledge and experiences on the topics being explored were coming to the forefront at a quick pace. According to Srivastava and Hopwood (2009, p. 76), iteration in qualitative research “is key to sparking insight and developing meaning.” Aspers and Corte (2019) state that iteration in research encompasses incorporating what you learn at one point in the research process into the remainder of the research. The pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges, necessitating rapid adjustments in my research methodologies. Qualitative research traditionally involves iterative processes, allowing me to refine my understanding over time. During COVID-19, this iterative approach became even more crucial than under non-crisis conditions. As a researcher, I needed to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances, such as evolving public health guidelines, shifting social behaviors and emerging variants. In addition, the iterative process facilitated the co-creation of knowledge, enabling timely adjustments in interventions and communication strategies. As the pandemic unfolded, iterative research bridged the gap between academia and practice, leading to actionable insights (Lupton & Lewis, 2021).

Following in this section I will delineate the approach covered in conducting my research in a COVID-19 environment. In the introduction segment of the research papers under review, some traditional key areas are documented, such as, the purpose of the research, background, an overview of the topic, the significance of the research and necessary steps mapping out the research are highlighted. The pandemic posed challenges to traditional research practices. Access to physical libraries and archives was restricted, prompting reliance on digital repositories. This entailed extensive scanning of relevant literature through reading online journal articles and finding an angle to present the information in a rational manner. This process was highly influenced by the COVID-19 environment and the temporal unfolding of

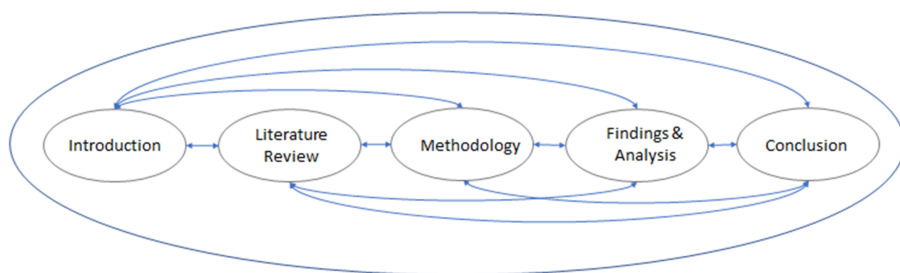


Figure 1. Interlinking research process. Source: Authors' own work

structures. For instance, I needed to keep abreast of the rapidly evolving information as COVID-19 created novel research questions and areas of interest. For me, literature reviews became more essential for identifying gaps, assessing methodological approaches and synthesizing evidence as the phenomenon developed. Additionally, as a researcher, I was also faced with some ethical dilemmas when reviewing studies conducted during the crisis as some articles never fully addressed the context in which data were collected and I also noted some potential biases.

For this purpose, the abstracting and indexing of journals was the first step in this process, with continuous probing as one source invariably led to another suitable article. During the literature review, I spent time searching in parallel for information located in other related articles, officially recognized institutional websites and trustworthy portals. One drawback to the process was that the obtaining of relevant information was constrained by the availability of resources (time, finance and library access) and the restricted capabilities I experienced in a COVID-19 environment. In conducting research during this period, I used a qualitative research approach. This entailed collecting and analyzing information from many reliable information sources. This method allowed me to better comprehend concepts, opinions and experiences. It also shaped the development of in-depth insights into research. I used various iterative approaches to explore the link between theory and the findings. In essence, the findings represent the story I am telling in response to the research topic. The descriptive and conceptual findings sought to capture the current status of the situation. Further, the iterative approach allowed for deeper analysis and connecting theory and practice. The back and forth permitted me to structure the research in a way that the common threads could be highlighted more easily for the readers to follow the articles. Such research adaptations allowed me to create stronger linkages between theory and findings that evolved as the world navigated these challenging times.

Computer software assisted with writing, reference management and grammar checking. Traditionally, library personnel, faculty and staff offer great help at this stage. However, this support was limited during COVID-19. The final stage of the interlinking research process was for me to derive my conclusions. I set out to draw sensible conclusions based on the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the literature and the information collected. Based on the findings and analysis, I set out to further summarize the article by stating the potential implications and further research. At each stage of the research, the sections were amended and revised several times in an iterative manner (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This was mainly due to the fact that I was writing on topics surrounding COVID-19 during the COVID-19 period and this context altered the traditional sequential approach to research. The final outcome of this approach is that through continuous reflection and adjustment, the article was improved to show greater connection between theory and practice. According to Mortari (2015, p 1), “reflection aims at understanding the forms of intelligibility by which the world is made meaningful,” thus making this approach suitable. In addition, some of my perspectives on the research journey align with Kalman (2019), who suggested that a qualitative research journey requires interest, time, patience and struggle.

The value of this approach enhanced my effectiveness in conducting research during the COVID-19 period. In reviewing the three reflective models, I can state some of the benefits to be derived in combining Schon’s reflection-in-action, Elliott’s revised Lewin’s self-reflective spiral and King’s model of reflective judgment. From the perspective of Schon’s work, I saw my journey benefiting from deliberately engaging in the topics surrounding COVID-19. This allowed for continuous practice to refine my skills and intuition during real-world situations. My approach allowed for feedback loops to establish mechanisms for immediate feedback during action. This involved observations and self-assessment. From the perspective of Elliott’s work, I was encouraged to maintain and build on reflective journaling. My enhanced understanding is that regularly writing about experiences, emotions and insights helps deepen understanding. Peer dialogue was also viewed as a benefit as it encouraged reflective conversations with colleagues, which allowed for discussing experiences and interpretations

that can lead to new insights. From the perspective of King's work, I saw a true benefit of enhancing critical thinking skills as it proved valuable to evaluating evidence, considering alternative viewpoints and recognizing biases. In addition, I was better able to apply reflective judgment to arrive at well-reasoned conclusions for the research I was conducting. Further, to the reflective models, through adaptive structuration, I was able to generate a better understanding of how technology adoption, organizational change and information flows are influenced by both structure and agency. This perspective allowed me to better manage group dynamics, power dynamics and the intricate interplay between agency and institutional structures.

How one might engage in research

Based on the reflective journey detailed in this autoethnography, several key recommendations for engaging in research during disruptive times emerge from my lived experience and analysis. First, a researcher must determine the type of research they wish to conduct, a process that benefits from reflective judgment (King & Kitchener) to align one's field of study, personal interests and institutional policies. Focusing on areas related to one's teaching can help in staying updated and developing curriculum. Nybom (2003) suggests harmony between research, teaching and learning. Choosing the right methodological approach is crucial. Qualitative methods are suitable for understanding phenomena in specific contexts, while quantitative methods are best for testing hypotheses and examining variable relationships. Interdisciplinary research can also be beneficial, allowing collaboration across academic fields.

Furthermore, developing a flexible research agenda, as informed by Elliott's iterative spiral, helps guide the research process and career path, though it should remain flexible. Reading extensively in areas of interest can build expertise and aid in publishing. Starting small and gradually expanding research scope is often more manageable, though some may prefer a bold approach. The peer review process is essential in scholarly research, requiring openness to feedback and adherence to ethical standards. While the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) ensure research compliance with ethical guidelines.

Building a repository of influential authors and journals in one's field is useful. Knowing seminal articles and journal rankings (e.g. Scopus and Web of Science) aids in selecting where to publish. Networking with colleagues can also provide valuable guidance. Finally, balancing research with personal life, a strategy essential for mental health that emerged from reflection-in-action (Schön), is important. Setting aside dedicated time slots for research helps maintain focus. Sharing research through forums, conferences and publications fosters feedback and further discourse, enhancing the overall research quality.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer a pivotal question: How can an integrated framework of reflective models enable academic researchers to navigate systemic crises and sustain research integrity? The journey detailed herein confirms that an integrated reflective framework is indispensable. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted my research journey, introducing unique challenges and valuable lessons. This research presents three models promoting reflective thinking: Schön's (1983) concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, Elliott's (1991) self-reflective spiral emphasizing iterative cycles of self-reflection and King and Kitchener's (1994) judgment model outlining cognitive development stages in reasoning and judgment. The application of these models constitutes the paper's core contribution, offering a methodical framework for navigating research during disruption. While contrasting these models further reveals critical differences in their timing, purpose and scope, this prompted the development of a tailored, methodical approach to research within the COVID-19 environment.

Insights from the research, framed by the three models, highlight major challenges and strategies to mitigate these issues. Firstly, guided by Schön's reflection-in-action, flexibility and resilience are crucial. The COVID-19 environment may disrupt research plans, necessitating adjustments in methodologies, timelines and expectations. Consequently, showcasing that resilience is key to managing unforeseen setbacks.

Secondly, through the lens of Elliott's iterative spiral, managing expectations and adapting goals are essential for proactive engagement in the research process. Lessons learned emphasize the importance of patience, as circumstances may delay research progress. Setting realistic expectations, particularly in the early months, is vital for managing research in a crisis environment.

Thirdly, reflective judgment (King & Kitchener) was key in navigating remote collaboration, which became crucial during the pandemic. Researchers must learn to collaborate effectively in virtual spaces, actively engaging with colleagues, team members, experts and communities. Building virtual networks, attending virtual conferences and maintaining open communication lines are valuable strategies.

Fourthly, a synthesis of all models underscored the necessity of prioritizing mental health and self-care. The pandemic increased stress levels, pushing researchers towards burnout. Exercise and seeking support when needed are important. Connecting with peers to share experiences and coping strategies provides a meaningful pathway forward.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a flexible, resilient and adaptive approach to research, concepts operationalized and understood through the application of Schön, Elliott and King & Kitchener's models. This reflective analysis demonstrates the significant value of applying structured reflective practice to sustain and enhance the research process during a global crisis. The findings affirm that deliberate reflective practice is not merely a remedial tool but a proactive strategy emphasizing remote collaboration, managing expectations, building resilience and prioritizing mental health as they were noted as key strategies in navigating the challenges and ensuring continued research productivity.

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