

From Tick-Box SWOT to Practice-First Reflection: A SWOT-Guided Reporting Model in a Vietnamese English-Major Practicum. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report describes the development and first implementation of a SWOT-Guided Reflection Design (SGR-Design) that re-engineers a mandated SWOT section in practicum reports into a practice-first reflection and reporting regime. The SGR-Design repositions SWOT from a single, end-of-placement matrix to a three-stage architecture that threads reflection across the practicum: a pre-placement diagnostic SWOT of readiness, weekly in-placement reflection loops anchored in concrete practice episodes, and a post-placement synthesis that draws together trajectories of learning and next-step plans. The model was developed in a Vietnamese English-major practicum after a meta summary of 376 reports exposed how conventional SWOT sections invited generic claims with little evidence, weak links to employability, and limited usefulness for mentoring. Drawing on genre-based pedagogy, reflection-as-pedagogy frameworks, and employability learning literature, the redesign integrates prompts, artefacts, and mentoring routines so that students must convert episodes into evidence and evidence into warranted SWOT claims. Early implementation with one cohort suggests that the SGR-Design supports more specific, evidence-based, and forward-looking accounts of practice that are legible to students, mentors, and external stakeholders. The practice report concludes by outlining principles and design choices that make the SGR-Design portable to other practicum and work-experience settings where reflective writing is required but under-designed.

Keywords: Employability learning; practicum; reflective writing.



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Introduction

Work-integrated learning is often positioned as a key pathway through which students convert disciplinary knowledge into credible professional capability. Yet, in many programs, the main institutional record of that learning is not the placement itself, but the texts students are required to produce about it. Practicum reports, reflective journals, and internship portfolios become the genres through which students must show what they can do, acknowledge what they cannot yet do, and sketch how they might move forward. When these genres are mandated and graded, prompts and rubrics do more than organise content, they contour what students feel able to say and what counts as “good” reflection (Boud & Walker, 1998; Moon, 2006; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). From a student success perspective, this matters because the same placements can yield very different narratives of readiness, depending on how reflection is framed and assessed.

Within this ecology, the familiar Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) template has become a common device for structuring reflection. Universities have embraced SWOT because its four quadrants render complex experiences legible and comparable across stakeholders (Dyson, 2004; Helms & Nixon, 2010). At the same time, strategy scholars have noted that, without an explicit analytic logic, SWOT easily collapses into lists that reify opinion and create an illusion of analysis (Hill & Westbrook, 1997). When SWOT is used as a reflective prompt in practicum reports, this risk is amplified. Students can learn to perform employability by naming generic strengths such as “hard-working” or “good at communication,” rather than to inquire into employability as situated practice. The challenge for work-integrated learning is therefore not simply whether to keep or abandon SWOT, but how to re-engineer a familiar and administratively valued form so that it becomes a vehicle for learning rather than a checklist at the end of a placement.

This practice report introduces a SWOT-Guided Reflection Design (SGR-Design), a three-stage model for planning and reporting practicum and work-experience learning. At its core, the SGR-Design repositions SWOT from a one-off, end-of-placement matrix to a practice-first reflection and reporting architecture that threads across the placement. It does so through three linked stages: (1) a pre-placement diagnostic SWOT of readiness that surfaces starting points and expectations, (2) in-placement reflection loops anchored in concrete episodes of practice that require students to link SWOT to specific evidence, and (3) a post-placement synthesis in which students redraw their SWOT in light of what actually happened and articulate credible next-step plans. Designed in this way, the SGR-Design can be populated with different prompts, artefacts, and mentoring routines, making it portable across practicum and work-experience settings while preserving a common logic of diagnosing, documenting, and synthesising practice.

The SGR-Design was developed in a Vietnamese English-major program where final-year students complete a short, heterogeneous practicum in settings such as schools, language centres, education companies, and offices where language work is central. In this program, the practicum culminates in a graded report in English that must include a SWOT section on internship performance and emerging professional identity. A cohort-level, student-voiced meta summary of 376 practicum reports showed that the existing end-of-placement SWOT requirement invited compact narratives in which strengths and weaknesses were asserted but rarely warranted with traceable evidence. Students readily claimed soft skills such as responsibility and self-discipline, but struggled to articulate how they navigated specialised practices (e.g., lesson planning, translation workflows, office documentation), and they tended to frame opportunities and threats in broad terms rather than as conditions encountered in their particular sites (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, 2007). The very places where readiness faltered (e.g., specialised practice, tacit know-how, and recognition) were precisely where the design was intended to teach.

In response, we re-engineered the mandated SWOT requirement as instructional infrastructure. Instead of treating the SWOT section as a neutral container for “reflection,” the SGR-Design works backwards from the kinds of narratives that would genuinely help students and supervisors make sense of practicum learning. It recalibrates the timing, prompts, and scaffolds so that students must anchor their claims in practice episodes, assemble de-identified artefacts that can be read by multiple audiences, and rehearse linking evidence, evaluation, and action over time. While the design is tuned to the constraints and affordances of one English-major practicum, the underlying architecture is deliberately kept simple enough to be adapted wherever reflective writing is required but under-designed.

Setting and Conventional SWOT-Based Reporting

The SGR-Design emerged within a four-year English-major program at a public university in the Mekong Delta, in the southwestern part of Viet Nam. In the final year, students complete a credit-bearing practicum in a range of heterogeneous sites, including language centres, schools, education companies, translation offices, and other workplaces where English language work is central. The practicum is designed as a capstone experience in which students are seen, and assessed, as

novice professionals rather than language learners. It culminates in a written report in English that is graded and read by multiple stakeholders within the program.

Before the redesign, the main mechanism for “reflection” in this report was a conventional, end-of-placement SWOT section. Students were required to list and briefly discuss their SWOT in relation to the practicum. A cohort-level, student-voiced meta summary of 376 practicum reports showed that this SWOT task routinely invited compact, generic narratives. Students tended to assert broad dispositions such as being responsible, hard-working, or friendly, while offering little traceable evidence from their actual tasks and interactions. Opportunities and threats were often framed in abstract labour-market terms rather than as concrete conditions in particular workplaces. As a result, the SWOT section rarely captured how students navigated specialised practices, how their capabilities developed over time, or where targeted support might be needed.

These patterns reflected intertwined conceptual and practical issues. Conceptually, the task did not specify what would count as reflection, how students might marshal evidence for their claims, or how they might make their emerging professional identities recognisable to different readers. The prompt treated SWOT as a self-description exercise rather than as an analysis of practice. Practically, the short duration and heterogeneity of placements, heavy concurrent coursework, uneven supervision, and the demands of writing in a second language made it difficult to sustain extensive journalling or feedback cycles. Under these conditions, students understandably gravitated towards safe, generic statements that could be produced quickly and were unlikely to be challenged. The SGR-Design was developed as a way to work with, rather than against, these constraints by re-engineering the mandated SWOT requirement into a lean reflection and reporting architecture that teaches students how to link practice, evidence, and evaluation over time.

The SGR-Design

Design Principles

The SGR-Design was developed by treating the practicum report as a designed genre rather than a neutral container. From a genre-based perspective, practicum reports are key sites where students must make their learning visible in ways that are legible to multiple audiences, and where textual conventions help shape what can be said and recognised as appropriate or powerful (Hyland, 2004). If the report is to function as evidence of emerging professional capability, it needs to invite more than a list of traits. It must make room for fine-grained accounts of practice, for the warranting of claims with evidence, and for the articulation of next steps in students’ trajectories.

The second guiding principle is that reflection is understood as pedagogy rather than as postscript. Work on reflective learning emphasises that structured reflection tasks need to be flexibly designed, explicitly scaffolded, and embedded in learning activities if they are to deepen learning rather than become a perfunctory add-on (Boud & Walker, 1998; Moon, 2006). In higher education, this involves a balancing act between providing enough structure to move students beyond description and leaving space for students’ own framing of experience (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). In the original practicum design, reflection was largely confined to a short, end-of-placement SWOT section. In the SGR-Design, by contrast, reflection is distributed across the practicum and anchored in specific, dated episodes of practice. Prompts and artefacts are used to require a disciplined habit of linking evaluation, evidence, and action over time, instead of asking students to write a general “reflection” once the placement is over.

Third, the SGR-Design treats employability learning as an ongoing interpretive process rather than a checklist of skills. Models of graduate employability emphasise the interaction of subject knowledge, skills, self-theories, and reflection, and they present employability as something students construct over time rather than as a static set of attributes (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Knight & Yorke, 2004). More recent work foregrounds the development of pre-professional identity as a key dimension of work readiness (Jackson, 2016). In this spirit, students in the SGR-Design are invited to read and re-read their experiences as they move through the practicum, to trace how particular capabilities are stretched in different sites, and to translate these traces into credible claims about who they are becoming as professionals. In this sense, SWOT is not a branding exercise but a scaffold for making sense of how strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats shift as students engage with real tasks under real constraints.

Finally, the design is locally tuned but intentionally portable. Reflection in professional courses is always shaped by contextual constraints and affordances (Boud & Walker, 1998), and employability-oriented curriculum work likewise stresses that designs must respond to local structural conditions while remaining transparent enough to be adapted elsewhere (Knight & Yorke, 2004). The SGR-Design was shaped by the affordances and constraints of one English-major practicum: short and heterogeneous placements, large student cohorts, uneven access to supervision, and the need to write in a second language. At

the same time, the underlying architecture is kept simple enough that programs in other disciplines and institutions can adapt it as required. The key is not to replicate the exact wording of prompts, but to preserve the core moves: diagnosing readiness, documenting practice episodes with evidence, and synthesising trajectories of change in ways that are meaningful for local stakeholders.

Three-Stage Model

At its simplest, the SGR-Design is a three-stage reflection and reporting architecture that threads SWOT across the practicum rather than confining it to the final pages of a report. The three stages can be populated with different prompts and artefacts in different programs, but they operate with a common logic.

First, students complete a pre-placement diagnostic SWOT of readiness. Before entering their practicum sites, they are invited to identify strengths they expect to draw on, weaknesses that may constrain their performance, opportunities they hope to pursue, and threats or constraints they anticipate in the placement. In doing so, they must draw on prior coursework, part-time work, and other experiences to make initial judgements about their readiness. This diagnostic artefact surfaces expectations and concerns, provides a baseline against which later learning can be interpreted, and gives supervisors an early picture of where support might be needed.

Second, students work through in-placement reflection loops anchored in practice episodes. During the practicum, they complete short, weekly loops in which they select a concrete episode of practice (e.g., a particular lesson, meeting, task, or interaction) and analyse it through a SWOT lens. For each episode, they identify whether it illustrates a strength, a weakness, an opportunity, or a threat, specify the evidence on which this judgement rests, and outline an action or response for the following week. In the English-major practicum, these loops are implemented as lean Analyze-Evidence-Act-Re-frame (AEAR) cycles that produce dated micro-notes. In other settings, the same logic could be embedded in digital logs, learning management systems, or workplace templates. The key is that reflection is tied to specific episodes and that claims must be warranted with evidence from practice.

Third, students complete a post-placement synthesis and forward-looking SWOT. After the placement, they re-read their diagnostic SWOT and weekly loops and use them to construct a synthesising account of their practicum learning. They redraw their SWOT in light of what actually happened, identify how particular strengths and weaknesses developed across sites and tasks, and articulate concrete next-step plans. In the English-major program, this synthesis is embedded in the practicum report as a graded section that must be readable by multiple audiences. In other programs, the same synthesis could feed into capstone courses, e-portfolios, or employability workshops.

Table 1 summarises these three stages, their purposes in practicum and work-experience settings more generally, and one example of how each stage is instantiated in this English-major practicum.

Table 1

Stages of the SGR-Design and their Role in Practicum/Work-Experience Settings

Stage	Purpose in practicum / work-experience settings	Example prompts and artefacts in this English-major practicum
Pre-placement diagnostic SWOT of readiness	Surface students' initial SWOT in relation to the upcoming placement, align expectations, and identify early support needs.	Short pre-placement task in which students map prior coursework and experiences onto the placement. Prompts such as " <i>Which prior courses and experiences prepare you for this practicum?</i> ", " <i>Which aspects of the work do you anticipate finding challenging?</i> ", and " <i>What opportunities and constraints do you foresee in this site?</i> " Artefact: One- to two-page diagnostic SWOT attached to the practicum contract.
In-placement reflection loops anchored in practice episodes	Anchor reflection in concrete episodes of practice, foster a habit of linking evaluation, evidence, and	Weekly AEAR loops in which students select a specific event, link it to SWOT categories, cite evidence (e.g., documents produced, feedback received, observations), and outline an action for the following week.

	action in real time, and provide a basis for targeted mentoring.	Artefacts: Dated micro-notes submitted to mentors and incorporated into the final report.
Post-placement synthesis and forward-looking SWOT	Synthesise learning across the placement, make trajectories of change visible, and connect practicum experience to future study and work.	Final report section in which students revisit their diagnostic SWOT and weekly notes, identify changes in SWOT based on documented experiences, and formulate concrete next-step plans. Artefact: Integrated synthesis chapter in the practicum report.

Beyond describing the stages themselves, it is also useful to show how this architecture differs from the conventional end-of-placement SWOT section it replaces. Table 2 contrasts key features of the earlier approach with those of the SGR-Design, highlighting shifts in timing, focus, evidence, and use in mentoring and assessment.

Table 2

From Conventional End-of-placement SWOT Section to SGR-Design

Element	Conventional end-of-placement SWOT section	SGR-Design
Timing	Single task at the end of the practicum.	Three stages distributed across pre-, during, and post-placement phases.
Focus	General impressions and self-descriptions.	Concrete practice episodes and trajectories of change.
Evidence	Minimal + claims often unsupported by specific examples.	Students required to link each claim to specific evidence from their practice.
Use in mentoring	Rarely used in supervision + mainly a grading requirement.	Weekly loops and final synthesis provide material for mentoring conversations and targeted feedback.
Connection to employability	Implicit + employability rarely named or operationalised.	Prompts explicitly connect episodes to emerging professional capabilities and forward-looking plans.

Implementation and Early Outcomes

The SGR-Design was first implemented with one full cohort of final-year English majors across their four-week practicum. At this stage, our aim was not to mount a large-scale effectiveness study, but to see whether the three-stage architecture could be made to work under real program constraints and whether it would genuinely alter how students wrote about, and worked within, their placements. The evaluation frame was therefore deliberately modest. We focused on three kinds of evidence: shifts in the quality of students' reflective writing, small practice indicators visible in students' own traces, and brief supervisor and mentor notes that showed how these shifts were being read in context.

A comparison of pre-design SWOT sections and texts written under the SGR-Design suggested a marked discursive shift. Before the redesign, many practicum reports compressed professional identity into short lists of traits and deficits, with students describing themselves as "responsible," "adaptable," or "lacking experience," and promising in very general terms to "try harder next week." Under the weekly in-placement loops, the same rhetorical space was gradually repurposed. By the third and fourth weeks, typical entries named a specific practice construct (for example, terminology management in a particular translation tool or checking numerical data in invoices), tied that construct to a concrete episode, and attached a small artefact such as a few lines of a revised document, a short audio segment from a lesson, or a redacted workflow snippet as warrant. Students then described one adjustment they had implemented and re-framed their strength or weakness in practice terms rather than as a fixed disposition. The length of entries did not increase substantially, but their density changed: claims, traces, and next steps were now routinely present in ways that the original end-of-placement SWOT matrix had not elicited.

These discursive moves were accompanied by small but observable shifts in practice. Translation-track students, for example, moved from ad hoc word lookups to establishing basic terminology routines, such as building simple term lists after a client callback and using pattern checks to reduce unit-conversion errors in tabular data. Teaching assistants used the weekly cycles to experiment with instruction scripting and time-boxing, reporting how stalled group tasks became more productive when long instructions were rewritten as a single sentence and paired with a visible timer. Office-track interns documented how they shortened document turnaround times by standardising file naming, version control, and hand-over notes. The design did not cause these changes on its own, but it provided a shared language and structure for noticing, documenting, and iterating decisions that students were already trying to make under pressure. Across tracks, what counted as a “strength” or “opportunity” was subtly recalibrated towards routines and techniques that matter in their emerging fields, rather than towards generic positive attributes.

Mentor and supervisor responses suggested that these changes were legible to others. The analytic rubric, with dimensions such as specificity and evidence, situated analysis, action and iteration, recognition orientation, and genre awareness, allowed mentors to comment quickly yet precisely on each weekly entry. Instead of general praise, feedback increasingly pointed to identifiable leverage points (e.g., a clearer transition between activities in a lesson, a decision to log error types in translations, or the choice to request a targeted observation from a site supervisor) and invited one further tightening of evidence or re-framing. Where site supervisors were able to contribute, they added brief notes that echoed rubric language, acknowledging, for example, “more systematic checking of figures” or “improved management of task transitions.” These micro-notes did not function as formal evaluations, but they operated as local recognition signals that students could see and incorporate into their final synthesis and portfolio artefacts.

Feasibility under short and heterogeneous placements was a central concern. Weekly entries were capped in length and designed to be written within an hour of the selected episode so that reflection sat close to enactment rather than becoming a distant summary. Mentoring followed a simple two-move script rather than open-ended commentary, and assessment remained light but cumulative: weekly entries were scored rapidly against the rubric, while the post-placement synthesis and portfolio piece attracted fuller written feedback because they generated artefacts that could plausibly travel beyond the course. Ethical guidance around trace collection (e.g., de-identifying documents, capturing only the minimum fragment needed to demonstrate a construct, and tightly clipping audio) was built into instructions so that students learned to document responsibly as part of their employability learning.

Taken together, these early signals suggest that the SGR-Design is implementable under real constraints and that it achieves its immediate aims: it shifts reflection from trait-listing to warranted analysis, supports small but meaningful adjustments in practice, and creates conditions in which supervisors can witness and name that movement. Conceptually, the patterns we observed (e.g., greater density of claim-evidence-action links, stronger alignment between “strengths” and enactable routines, and more targeted recognition from mentors) are not tied to English language work alone. They point to the kinds of changes that any practicum or work-experience program might seek when re-engineering mandated reflective tasks into lean, practice-first assessment regimes.

Limitations and Transferability

This account is deliberately anchored in a single institution, a single disciplinary area, and short, heterogeneous placements. The SGR-Design was developed for final-year English majors in one Vietnamese public university, across language-related sites that vary in workload, mentoring traditions, and resourcing. Reflection is written in English, which functions simultaneously as a professional medium and an additional performance demand for many students. Supervisory participation is uneven, and the evidentiary traces that can be ethically captured differ by context: some sites allow clipped audio and de-identified document snippets, while others restrict students to field notes or brief supervisor comments. These features temper any claim to generalisability and define the design space within which the SGR-Design was made to work: short, scripted mentoring in place of extended feedback, small de-identified artefacts rather than comprehensive recordings, and an emphasis on within-student change across weeks rather than cross-site standardisation.

At the same time, the architecture is intentionally portable. What is meant to travel is not the specific practice targets (for example, regex checks for tabular data or the exact timing of classroom-management prompts) but the underlying logic: prompts that require warrants, short cycles that bind reflection to enactment, and recognition mechanisms that leave communicable traces. Programs adopting the design can begin with a rapid baseline of student narratives, through a meta summary of existing reflections or a smaller set of interviews, to locate local pressure points and then tune prompts, artefacts, and rubrics accordingly. In disciplines such as business, engineering, health, or social work, the three stages can be populated

with different practice constructs and evidentiary traces, provided that the same ethics of minimal capture and de-identification are followed and that students are required to show how claims derive from concrete episodes of work.

In this sense, the SGR-Design does not propose a universal template for practicum reflection so much as a way of standardising how practice is named, evidenced, and iterated. The approach remains bounded by its context: a non-Anglophone, Global South program in which students themselves located friction at the interface between classroom knowledge and specialised practice, and perceived leverage in guided access to tacit techniques, varied settings, and networks that afford recognition. Yet, by making its prompts, cycles, and evidentiary expectations explicit, the design offers other programs a transparent starting point. Adaptation will require local negotiation of ethics, workload, and assessment regimes, but the core proposition, that a mandated SWOT requirement can be repurposed into a genre-aware pedagogy that makes learning legible, can be tested, adapted, and refined across diverse work-integrated learning settings.

Conclusion

This practice report has traced how a familiar but under-specified requirement in a practicum report was re-engineered into a practice-first reflection and reporting regime. A cohort-level meta summary of 376 practicum reports made visible how the original task encouraged students to list traits and labour-market generalities rather than to analyse concrete episodes of work. In a program where the practicum report is one of the main institutional records of students' transition into novice professionals, this pattern raised questions about what kinds of learning were being documented, recognised, and carried forward.

In response, the SGR-Design repositioned SWOT as a three-stage architecture threaded across the practicum: a pre-placement diagnostic SWOT of readiness, in-placement reflection loops anchored in specific practice episodes, and a post-placement synthesis that redraws SWOT in light of what actually happened. Implemented under real program constraints, this architecture did not lengthen students' writing but changed its density. Claims about SWOT became more routinely tied to traceable evidence and small actions over time, and mentors gained a clearer, shared language for recognising and nudging those shifts. The early outcomes reported here are necessarily modest and situated, but they illustrate what becomes possible when mandated reflective tasks are treated as designable pedagogical infrastructure rather than as neutral containers for "reflection." The SGR-Design does not offer a universal template for employability learning. Instead, it proposes a simple, portable logic that other programs can adapt: prompts that require warrants, cycles that keep reflection close to enactment, and recognition mechanisms that leave communicable traces. In this sense, the model is less about defending SWOT as a particular tool and more about showing how a widely used format can be re-purposed to support more specific, evidence-based, and forward-looking accounts of practicum and work-experience learning.

For practitioners and program designers, the invitation is to look closely at the reflective genres already in circulation in their contexts and to ask what kinds of narratives of readiness they currently elicit. Small, locally tuned changes to timing, prompts, and artefacts, guided by the three-stage architecture outlined here, can help students move from listing who they think they are to documenting what they actually do, how they are changing, and where they might go next. Further work is needed to examine the SGR-Design over multiple cohorts and in other disciplines, but the early signals reported here suggest that re-imagining required SWOT tasks as genre-aware pedagogies is a promising direction for strengthening student success in practicum and work-experience settings.

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