The Reflecting Robinson

A literary analysis of the learning process of Robinson Crusoe

Per Pettersson

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Introduction

To any reader in western society, Robinson Crusoe is a well-known character. Many of us come across his story even before we can read, through children’s books and bedtime stories, or any of the other numerous versions of Daniel Dafoe’s original. *Robinson Crusoe* has also been used to create adaptations such as Hollywood blockbuster *Cast Away*, the Swedish reality show *Robinson* and the American TV-series *Lost*. The core of these stories is always the same: a lone man or group of men and women battle against nature to survive. Below the surface of a physical struggle between nature and man, I see a story about human adaptation, learning and development. The reason why Robinson survives is that he uses his knowledge, adapts to the situation and learns from experience. The same goes for any other of the different characters we meet in both the original and the adaptations. It is never through physical domination alone that a Robinson character triumphs; the ability to develop as the game develops is just as important.

I believe that a story this popular must influence its readers in significant ways. The story does not only provide us with a common frame of reference but also with a hero with whom we can easily relate; the thought of being alone, shipwrecked, in the way Robinson is, provokes in us a primal fear, and this is also central to the plot in many of the adaptations. A strong identification with Robinson is likely to strengthen the possibility that we become influenced by the character traits he possesses and that we act in similar ways as he does. This thought is what has led me to look at the dynamics of Robinson from a pedagogical perspective, to try to understand in what way he might affect the many students who meet him during their education.

The relationship between *Robinson Crusoe* and education may be traced back to Jean Jacques Rousseau, who argues in *Emile* that *Robinson Crusoe* was the only book Emile needed to read in order to finish his education (176). This argument might lead us to conclude that the formal learning that is to be found in the school system is inferior to the learning that takes place on Robinson’s island since Robinson learns from reality and not from books. In “Rousseau’s
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Crusoe: Or, On Learning to Read as Not Myself” (2012), Brian McGrath analyses Emile’s reading of Robinson Crusoe and draws the conclusion that Emile “must manage to unite … the natural and the social” (137) in order for his education and reading of Robinson Crusoe to have the desired effect. Even though Rousseau claims that the natural education is the one most desired (6-7), what McGrath concludes from his analysis of Emile is similar to the viewpoint I will take in my analysis, which is that learning has the greatest desired effect when it takes place in the tension between practice and theory. Therefore, if Robinson is a learning character, he must show that he alternates between theory and practice, between doing and reflecting.

Robinson Crusoe has been analysed by many theorists, from many different theoretical perspectives. Gert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soethart adopt a Marxist perspective of man versus nature and the creation of a capitalist society based on power structures in “Landscape, Culture and Education in Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe” (2012). A post-colonial perspective of the story as metaphor of the growing domination of western society is presented by Chandrima Chakraborty in "Interrupting the Canon: Samuel Selvon's Postcolonial Revision of Robinson Crusoe" (2003). In addition, there are numerous examples of analyses of the relationship between Robinson and Friday, primarily from a post-colonial perspective, as seen in David Medalie’s "Friday Updated: Robinson Crusoe as Sub-Text in Gordimer's July's People and Coetzee's Foe" (1997). An important idea in my argument is that if readers use literature to reflect upon reality, literature can play an important part in shaping their learning process. This perspective has been explored by Andrew O’Malley and Jack Zipes in The Making of the Modern Child: Children’s Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century (2003), where they study how literature reflects society’s desire to modify the behaviour of children and the “class and ideological conflicts within that society as well” (20). With a similar focus, Vandermeersche and Soethart, mentioned above, argue from a Marxist perspective that Robinson Crusoe “provides strategies for describing processes such as education” (1). However, neither O’Malley and Zipes nor
Vandermeersche and Soethart are interested exclusively in education, but focus on this use of *Robinson Crusoe* as a way to understand cultural phenomena from a more general point of view. This relationship between culture, literature and education is further developed by Brian Boyd’s evolutionary perspective in *On the Origin of Stories* (2009). Boyd argues that stories are important tools when we try to understand our world, as they “provide scenarios or models that we can draw on in planning our own actions and making our own decisions” (193). In this way, stories provide reflexivity; inspired by reality, they equip their readers with material for them to create their own realities, inspired by stories. To me, this is the reason that fiction is such an important tool in education and it is what motivates me to want to understand Robinson as a learner. As a consequence, I aim to discuss how Robinson Crusoe may serve as an example of how students can learn from their fictional heroes how to become better learners.

My position is that Robinson is a learning character, that he excels at reflecting upon his mistakes, that he learns from them and that he represents a mindset that helps him to overcome challenges. I intend to approach my thesis from a pedagogical perspective inspired by the educational philosopher John Dewey, who is famously quoted as having claimed that the way to learn is through “learning by doing”. In my opinion, however, this quote, simplifies his learning theories far too much. The core of Dewey’s theory is not focused on *doing* but on the relationship between doing and reflecting, which is described by what Dewey actually wrote: “Learn to do by knowing and to know by doing” (*Applied Psychology*, 182). These ideas are developed throughout Dewey’s work and are found again in *The Relation Between Theory and Practice* (1904), *How We Think* (1910) and *Experience and Education* (1938). In all three books he describes and gives examples of how theoretical and practical learning can be arranged to nurture each other; it is also here, especially in *How We Think*, that his theory of reflective thought is developed. This theory describes how practical experience without reflection fails to lead to deep learning and how reflection tends to be fruitless if it is not based on practical experiences (37, 43-44, 202). Modern
studies, such as Jack Mezirow’s “How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning” (1990) often consolidate Dewey’s ideas. Mezirow has found, for example, that in order to create learning cultures at workplaces, what one needs to ensure is in place is a structure that supports meaning and regular reflection (199-202).

Moreover, reflection only works if one is able to challenge one’s own ideas. American Psychologist Caroline Dweck’s research, presented in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2007) has identified a possible reason why effective reflection comes more easily to some people than to others. She has found that people can be divided into two groups. The first group perceives intelligence as a condition one is born with and that does not change much over time; these learners have a “fixed mindset” (15-16). The other group experiences intelligence as dynamic and as constantly developing with the challenges one undertakes; they experience a “growth mindset” (15-16). To belong to, or rather having been socialised into, the second group gives you better odds to succeed with learning activities since it allows you to see mistakes as opportunities for understanding what you need to learn (Dweck, 4-9). Thus, it makes an effective foundation for developing a good ability to use reflective thought as a tool to learn.

**Robinson before the Island**

As most readers know, *Robinson Crusoe* is a story about a young man who, contrary to his father’s advice, sets out to sea in order to seek adventure. His father tells him that there is no happiness to be sought in adventure or hard work. Instead he claims that happiness is found in the calm of the middle class, where men can go “silently and smoothly thro’ the world” (3). Robinson however, does not want to follow this slow walk through life; he would rather seek adventure and does so at sea. To go against the paternal will was considered a drastic approach in 18th century society. In fact, the shipwreck has been analysed by Juan Pimentel in “Robinson Crusoe: The Faith of the British Ulysses” (2009) as symbolising the punishment by God for doing just that
To the modern reader, for a young man to go against his father’s will, probably seems more natural than not to do so. The way Robinson is viewed has changed over time and has been influenced by both the many adaptations created and by changes in the readers’ social environment. Andrew O’Malley has argued for example, that an eighteenth-century reader’s view of the story was shaped by the very popular, twenty-four-page re-working of the original called *Chapbook* editions ("Poaching on Crusoe's Island", 19). As my primary interest here is how the original Robinson is viewed from a pedagogical perspective now and, in turn, how modern readers would understand the original Robinson if they use my method, it is important to keep in mind how influenced we are by the many adaptations made from the story. It is through this awareness that we are more likely to see past those influences.

I divide *Robinson Crusoe* into three parts. The first part tells the story of how Robinson becomes a sailor, businessman and plantation owner. This part is important, as it captures both the state of mind and the knowledge and experience with which Robinson enters his adventure. The second part of the story, containing the shipwreck, the survival on the island and the rescue and naming of Friday is well-known and it is from here that the material used to create modern adaptations like the ones mentioned in my introduction, is usually taken. The last part of the story is less known; it is the story of how Robinson, Friday and a couple of saved prisoners, capture a ship to be able to return to England.

When I analyse the story I will approach these parts in slightly different ways and I will focus on the first and second part. Initially, the second part was what interested me the most, but my first analysis of the content led me to reflect upon the obvious fact that no learner can be understood as a *tabula rasa*; instead we must always understand him or her by looking at his or her point of origin. To use the term of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, we are looking for the learner’s zone of proximal development, which is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential
development” (“Interaction Between Learning and Development”, 33). It is in the tension that makes up this zone that we learn, which is why the theory is of interest to my understanding of Robinson. Moreover, our connections and relationship to our early education also affects our natural mindset (Dweck, 57-58). I will thus begin by trying to understand what it is that Robinson learns from his early adventures, how this affects the knowledge that he brings to the island, and also what his natural mindset is.

Below is an example of how Robinson expresses himself, which I will use to exemplify how I have analysed the book. The passage is taken from a scene where Robinson thinks back on the choices that put him on the deserted island.

As I had once done thus in my breaking away from my parents, so I could not be content now, but I must go and leave the happy view I had of being a rich and thriving man in my new plantation, only to pursue a rash and immoderate desire of rising faster than the nature of the thing admitted; and thus I cast myself down again into the deepest gulf of human misery that ever man fell into, or perhaps could be consistent with life and a state of health in the world. (Defoe, 16.)

The foundation of my analysis is built upon a search for this type of passage; passages that express reflection as part of a learning process, related to a nearby or recent experience where a mindset, whether fixed or open to new impressions, is expressed. In the beginning of the passage Robinson refers to a history in the past and compares it to a more recent event, and thus expresses the initial stage of the reflective thought. He expresses what actions have led him to his situation and also the reasons why he acted as he did - “rising faster than the nature of the thing admitted” (Defoe, 16). That he is able to criticise his own actions in turn makes him lean towards a growth mindset,
which gives him an opportunity to learn from his mistakes. In this passage we find both the will to address challenges and the tendency to ponder upon the horrors that adventures sometimes bring.

Part of the analysis is based on the use of a digitalised version of *Robinson Crusoe* to search for words and phrases that might be of significance. I have used this part of my analysis to create a starting point for my further discussions. The words I have searched for are “learn,” “reflect” and “mind” and I have studied whether the words are found mainly in the first part of the book or in the second and whether they are found in clusters or are spread out evenly. These two methods combined have allowed me to compare my own findings to those found when using the computer search. The methods have simplified the work to find and compare the content of the passages and to illustrate where in the story the passages I have marked and the passages found by computer search occur.

The first thing that struck me was that the word *mind* was so much more common than *reflect* and *learn*; in the text I found 101 examples of *mind* while there were only 42 examples of *reflect* and 27 of *learn*. To better understand these results I decided to compare them to those in three other novels: *Pamela* (1740) by Samuel Richardson, *Gulliver’s Travels* (1729) by Jonathan Swift and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Bronte. Being aware that there are a great many other novels I could have consulted, these novels where chosen because of the features they share with *Robinson Crusoe*: they all have first person narrators and they all deal with characters that in some way travel, develop or learn as a critical part of the novel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book/Word</th>
<th>Mind</th>
<th>Reflect</th>
<th>Learn</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Robinson Crusoe</em></td>
<td>101</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Pamela</em></td>
<td>219</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td><em>Jane Eyre</em></td>
<td>136</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td><em>Gulliver’s Travels</em></td>
<td>54</td>
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Table 1.
The comparisons in Table 1 illustrate that between three of the novels, there were not any major differences in how common the words were, in relation to each other. However, as becomes apparent in the above table, one of the novels stands out and it is the only other book containing a shipwreck: *Gulliver's Travels*. This difference can perhaps be explained by historical shifts in the meaning of the word *reflect*. If we look in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it appears that earlier texts connected reflection primarily to religious or self-reflecting activities, as in the examples of both Hill and Defoe below. In later texts, however, reflection is instead connected to the luxury of having time to think. Having said that, I wish to point out that it lies outside the scope of this essay to further research why these differences appear. I have merely used the comparison to suggest an explanation in relation to my discussion.

1595  *Problems of Aristotel* sig. G5,  To reflect and looke vnto himselfe, is a token that we are separated from the flesch.

1644  T. Hill *Season for Englands Selfe-reflection* 17  The children of God … ought presently to reflect by self-consideration, when they see their Fathers displeasure once begin to appeare.

1715  D. Defoe *Family Instructor* i. i. 8  Reflect and argue, and know both your self, and Him that made you.

1903  H. Keller *Story of my Life* i. xx. 68,  I used to have time to think, to reflect, my mind and I.

1992  *N.Y. Times Bk. Rev.* 11 Oct. 32/3  Under the pressure of brutalizing work in the home or out of it, she may have indeed stopped thinking ... It may be necessary to disappear for a while..in order to begin to reflect.
Connected to the themes of the four books, where three of them are more explicitly religiously oriented than *Gulliver’s Travels*, it may explain why “reflect” is less common in this book and “learn” more frequently used. Robinson, Pamela and Jane are all preoccupied with describing where their *mind* is and how they *reflect*. Pamela, for example, often connects reflections to something moving, as in this example from the middle of the story “the painful struggle I underwent when I began to reflect, and to read your moving journal” (Richardson, web). Moreover, Jane and Pamela speak of learning and mean that they find out something, often focusing on how it happened, as when Jane writes that ” I learned, for the first time, from Miss Abbot’s communications to Bessie, that my father had been a poor clergyman” (Bronte, web). Meanwhile Gulliver is focused on describing what, for example “learning navigation… as well as learning their language” (Swift, web), not how, he has learned. My general point here is to show how the words are used differently depending on the focus of the stories and characters and thus that this has been kept in mind as I continued to develop my analysis.

Another comparison made concerns the relationship within *Robinson Crusoe* as to the relative frequency with which the words in the two different parts of the story occurs. The first part of the story is considerably shorter and makes up roughly fourteen percent of the words in the book (Defoe, web.). While this part contains 25 percent of the “learn” hits and 19 percent of the “reflect” hits, the “mind” hits are more evenly spread out; 12 percent are found in the first part. Looking at this data, the relationship between them and the parts of the text that I have marked as containing reflection or representing a mindset, I find that they do not correlate. Instead, they actually seem to contradict each other, creating an almost negative correlation. For example, in 25 percent of the instances where the word “reflect” is found, I have marked no instances of reflection that relates to learning. Also, in this part I noted several instances where Robinson seems to have a dynamic mindset, but none which correlate with where the word “mind” is found.
The hits for “reflect” show us that the word is almost exclusively used about reflections about God during the first part of the story. For instance, when Robinson experiences his first storm at sea, he states “I began now seriously to reflect upon what I had done, and how justly I was overtaken by the judgment of Heaven” (4). Further, when he realises he is the sole survivor after the shipwreck, he makes a “reflection upon the distinguished goodness of the hand which had preserved me” (34). In the beginning, Robinson is not the eager learner he later becomes, neither is he the ruler of his own destiny. Rather, he sees himself as a victim of it, which according to Dweck is a hopeless position to reflect, learn and develop from (101). I also found that the use of the word “mind” is often related to dark themes. Robinson often speaks about the “horror of mind” (6, 7), “agony of mind” (5) or that he is “terrified in mind” (4); all three examples are taken from his first shipwreck. These expressions are far from testifying to the dynamic mindset that I expected to find. It should be remembered, though, that these are all instances where Robinson explicitly speaks about his mind and about reflecting. However, as I will soon discuss, what Robinson says and what he does are two different things.

The reason I have not marked any instances of reflection is related to the fact that this first part is told as a summary of what happens before the major event takes place. It is for example impossible to say whether Robinson uses reflective thinking or not in a passage such as the following description of the journey to Guinea.

Yet even in this voyage I had my misfortunes too; particularly, that I was continually sick, being thrown into a violent calenture by the excessive heat of the climate; our principal trading being upon the coast, from latitude of 15 degrees north even to the line itself. (Dafoe, 10)
It is only the more exciting parts that are told in greater detail, for example the escape from the slave trader (8-10). What I found, searching for the word *reflect* are the instances when Robinson thinks about God and salvation and the word is used in a different way than when Dewey uses it to describe the process of learning. According to Carol Dweck the dynamic mindset is defined by the “tendency to embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, see effort as the path to mastery (and to) learn from criticism” (245). At the beginning of the story, I see in Robinson indications that he fulfils at least the first three, if not all four, of these criteria, and that he arrives at the deserted island with a mindset that will aid him in surviving.

In fact, I have found an interesting tension between Robinson’s explicit expressions about his mindset and the mindset that he expresses through acting. On the one hand, he seems to dwell on his own misery and, on the other, he takes on every challenge he meets. The whole plot of the story begins with Robinson taking on a challenge, when he heads out to sea against his father’s advice. It is typical of the dynamic mindset to be enthralled by challenges and even though Robinson first decides to follow his father’s wish, he then writes that “a few days wore it all off; and, in short, to prevent any of my father’s further importunities, in a few weeks after I resolved to run quite away from him” (4). Then, in an effort to be a good son, he confers with his parents again, but in the end he decides to leave “without asking God’s blessing or my father’s” (4). As always, when conflicts between opposites appear, it is useful to analyse this phenomenon. In this particular case it seems that Robinson, once he has taken on the challenge, is met by adversities and it is then that he talks about the “horror” or “agony of mind”. However, it is only on one occasion, on this first journey when the ship is about to sink and all hope is gone, that he lies down and begs for mercy. In every other passage in the beginning of the story, Robinson meets and deals with adversities even though he complains about them. He also shows that he changes tactics when he comes across a challenge the second time; he is more proactive during his second shipwreck, knowing that it is his actions that will lead him to safety.
Consequently, I concluded that in the search for Robinson’s zone of proximal development, looking for the word “learn” would be a good place to start. Early in the story Robinson describes that he has inherited a “competent share of learning” (3), meaning learning in general/a general education, from his father, but after this we have to wait until he is captured by the slaver before he speaks of learning again. This time he starts by describing that he has learned too little about being a sailor from his earlier journeys because he always walked on board as a gentleman. When he does this he clearly expresses a growth mindset in the sense that he is recognising the relationship between hard work and growing competence. Moreover, he describes that even though he thinks he could have learned more, he “took delight to learn” (8) the things he actually did. From the first part of the story, we understand that Robinson knows how to handle a boat, how to grow crops and to repair tools but we do not know how, at least not in any greater detail, he learned these things.

To briefly summarise this initial analysis, I understand Robinson to be a person expressing a dynamic mindset through his actions and through his statements about learning. Unfortunately, I have not found examples that describe whether he expresses the use of reflective thought as part of a learning process or not, but I am not surprised by this lack of information as it can be explained by the way the part is narrated: as a summary. I have also concluded that Robinson possesses many useful tools and knowledge that he can use to start the learning process on the island. His zone of proximal development allows him to immediately tackle quite advanced problems.
Robinson on the Island

Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence—a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors. The successive portions of the reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another; they do not come and go in a medley. Each phase is a step from something to something—technically speaking, it is a term of thought. Each term leaves a deposit which is utilized in the next term. The stream or flow becomes a train, chain, or thread.

(Dewey, How We Think, 3)

This quote from Dewey describes the core of what reflective thought is and it clearly shows that reflection, in Dewey’s terms, does not mean what it means to Defoe, which was to think hard upon something, commonly God. To Dewey it is essential that there is not only one though, but a whole chain of thoughts connected by a consecutive order. This means that if one such “term of thought” (3) is altered, it changes the conditions of the chain. To try different terms, theoretically as well as practically, is to start the process that represents the relationship between experience and reflection: the learning process. As I will soon show, Robinson does this, both from a practical perspective, when working with tools, planting seeds and so forth and from a theoretical perspective, when coming up with new solutions and explanations to why life on the island works as it does. It is natural then, to make the connection that the mindset affects learning, since the right mindset helps or even triggers reflective thought. When one relates experience to reflection, one must be prepared to ransack every attempt for mistakes in order to reflect on how a change of tactics might influence the next outcome. Consequently, there is a great risk that a learner with a
fixed mindset will not recognise his/her own mistakes as the reason for failure. Instead he/she will blame the circumstances, leading away from changes of the terms of thought and new tactics and towards conclusions that blame outer circumstances for the failed attempt. The word count experiment in the first part of my analysis showed that Robinson talks a lot about reflective activities, but that far from all of them qualify or can be classified as reflective thoughts. The distinction between the two is that a reflective thought, as defined by Dewey, needs to be part of a chain of thought; that is, it needs to lead from one point to another. Furthermore, for me to be able to note it, it needs to be expressed in at least some of its parts.

Another interesting discovery I made was that in the second part of the story, the word “reflect” seems to have different connotations than in the first. While in the first part “reflect” only occurs in passages where Robinson either consults God or worries about his hopeless situation, the first mentioning of the word in the second part can be related to an example of reflective thought. It seems that as soon as Robinson finds himself on the island, he starts to adapt and learn in order to survive. He does this by using his logic and an ability to reflect upon what he does. Having landed safely on the island, Robinson immediately starts to gather necessities from the ship. He explicitly reflects afterwards that the reason for his success was that he “had lost no time, nor abated any diligence” (23) to gather all that he needed from the ship. He thus shows the reader that he has learned how to act from his earlier adventures; he works effectively in order to survive and he assesses the situation afterwards in order to develop.

However, it is not every reflection after this one that contains reflective thoughts, but I find them in five more passages, not fully developed, but at least with a hint of the “term of thought” Dewey describes (How We Think, 3). In three of these passages, the reflections are related to the fact that Robinson discovers traces of other humans, something he struggles to explain and understand. In one case the reflection is related to how we only appreciate the things
around us that we have use for and the last example is related to the joy Robinson feels over having the opportunity to teach Christian values to Friday.

After some time on the island, an earthquake creates a small landslide that could have crushed Robinson if he had been in bed when it happened. This experience makes him want to move his sleeping quarters, a project which is soon cancelled by the discovery that the earthquake has also broken the stranded ship apart, making it easier to scavenge it for parts of wood and iron. In the midst of the activity of collecting parts of the ship, Robinson then becomes ill and this prevents him from making trips to the island and leads him to becoming more explicit in his religious reflections. Subsequent to the illness, he starts making journeys around the island and finds a beautiful spot where he spends a month building a second house, his “country-house” (39), so that in the end he has two houses. The passage below is Robinson’s description of how he begins his attempt to move his camp and set up a safer home considering the dangers he might face from everything from new earthquakes to pirates and wild animals.

April 22. — The next morning I begin to consider of means to put this resolve into execution; but I was at a great loss about my tools. I had three large axes, and abundance of hatchets (for we carried the hatchets for traffic with the Indians); but with much chopping and cutting knotty hard wood, they were all full of notches, and dull; and though I had a grindstone, I could not turn it and grind my tools too.

The beginning of this passage captures a clear example of how Robinson expresses reflective thought. He has made up his mind about moving the camp, but he doesn’t set out to do it immediately. Instead he stops to assess his condition and finds
that he has other problems that need solving, before he can get to the creation of a new house. The passage continues:

This cost me as much thought as a statesman would have bestowed upon a grand point of politics, or a judge upon the life and death of a man. At length I contrived a wheel with a string, to turn it with my foot, that I might have both my hands at liberty. Note.—I had never seen any such thing in England, or at least, not to take notice how it was done, though since I have observed, it is very common there; besides that, my grindstone was very large and heavy. This machine cost me a full week’s work to bring it to perfection. (Defoe, 32)

Here Robinson continues his train of thought and also expresses that new knowledge has been added, even though it was added some time after the passage took part, while summing up his experience on the island. Robinson explicitly expresses that this process has forced him to analyse the situation and then describes how he solved the problem. The reason why he needed to learn something new in order to solve his problem is expressed in a continued reflective thought, where he describes that he had not noticed before how common his solution was. This, he only saw when he, upon his return home, knew what to look for.

The same passage is used in the introduction to Ann Van Sant’s analysis, “Crusoe’s Hands.” To Van Sant this particular section is important because it exemplifies and tears down the often hierarchic relationship between academic thinking and hand labour as Crusoe shows that both are equally important to his mission (“Crusoe’s Hands,” 120-21). Van Sant analyses how these two different undertakings are valued, saying that there is a traditional chasm between hand
labour and academic work where, depending on the social context, one is often valued higher than the other (121). Van Sant argues that *Robinson Crusoe* effectively sets this difference aside, using both irony and matter of fact examples, to show the importance of both perspectives (132). I agree with Van Sant’s analysis and find that the passage is an example of that if you want to learn, it is necessary to master both perspectives. As Dewey claims, we do not learn simply by doing; we need to stop and reflect upon what we have done in order to learn. Being a gentleman, which is how Robinson describes himself (8), he has not had the opportunity to learn all the necessary traits to survive when he comes to the island; but neither does he show, as Van Sant argues, the gentleman’s view of looking down on hand labour as something separated from academic thinking (121). His strength is that he understands the value of having the ability to combine the two competences into very effective learning.

I wish to dwell on the significance of this key passage a little longer in order to look at the relationship between qualitative analysis and the measured occurrences of the word “reflect.” As seen in the description above, the passage covering the tool grinding to the building of the new country house can be divided into different sections: firstly, Crusoe decides to build and needs to grind his tools, secondly, he finds the wreck broken and starts gathering material, thirdly, he turns ill, fourthly, he starts making journeys across the island and finds the new spot for a country-house, and finally, he builds a new home while still keeping the old one. Looking at these five sections of the passage, I have marked plenty of instances where reflective thoughts are present in the first two and in the last two of these passages. For example, there is the time when Robinson detects corn:

> But after I saw barley grow there, in a climate which I knew was not proper for corn… I began to suggest that God had miraculously caused (it)... At last it occurred to my thoughts that I shook a bag of chickens’ meat out in that place; and then the wonder
began to cease; and I must confess my religious thankfulness to God’s providence began to abate, too. (Dafoe, 31)

Here I find that Robinson starts by giving a supernatural explanation, but also that he soon turns to reason and starts a reflective thought that, over some time, leads him to find out the truth. This truth he soon uses in order to improve his life on the island by replanting the seeds and thus starts building a grain storage.

However, when I take a closer look at the middle passage, where Robinson is ill, there seems to be a complete absence of reflective thought. In fact, the one time I noticed reflective thought being expressed during the illness, is when Robinson tries to make a cure out of rum and water, evaluates the effectiveness of the medicine and changes the dose:

This evening I renewed the medicine, which I had supposed did me good the day before… only I did not take so much as before… however, I was not so well the next day… as I hoped I should have been (Dafoe, 33).

In the passage as a whole I counted the word “reflect” five times, but it never relates to reflective thought, only to reflections on God and they all occur in the passage where Robinson is ill and explicitly reflects on how he has forgotten to look “upward towards God” (34). Again, I come back to the conclusions drawn from the historical use of “reflect” and think that this passage again strengthens the idea that the word, as used by Defoe, does not have the same meaning as it has today and certainly not the same meaning as that defined by Dewey in How We Think. For Robinson’s use of the word “reflect,” I can see two possible synonyms. For religious purposes “meditate” is suitable and when he reflects on his life and situation “ponder” might be a better choice.
Going back to the passage starting on 22 April (32), I find that it forms a demarcation between the Robinson that comes to the island with a mindset to learn and the Robinson that further develops his skills using reflective thought as a powerful tool. I base this analysis on the fact that shortly after he has built his country-house, there is a long passage devoted to the cultivation of farming techniques. This passage is where I find the highest frequency of Robinson expressing reflective thoughts; between pages 42 and 47, I have noted 15 occurrences. Robinson’s reflective thoughts are, for example, related to how he observes that the grain grows better in some places than other and makes changes based on his experiences. Moreover, he observes what scares the birds away from the grain and develops an effective scarecrow. Also, he designs and builds tools to grind and process the grain so that he might make bread. During all of these processes Robinson acts as an effective learner, making predictions, trying them out in practice. Moreover, he examines and reflects upon the results, makes improvements and then restarts the circle of reflective thought through the relationship between experience and practice. Once he has made these improvements, he is content with life on the island. Curiously enough, a cluster of hits for the word “reflect” immediately follows this passage. Between pages 49 and 50, I found six of the total 34 hits on “reflect,” or 17 per cent of the total, making it the passage where the word is most frequently referred to in the entire book.

All of these occurrences relate to God or self, evenly divided between the two, and the entire passage is dedicated to Robinson’s thought of how one should refrain from giving up in the face of such difficulties that he has met. The thoughts seem triggered by Robinson evaluating his situation and the life he has made for himself. In short, even though explicit reflective thought is not present, the passage is about setting up the right mindset to survive while at the same time being unable to take credit for the success. It is a key passage because again it shows the discrepancies between those two sides of Robinson’s character. Instead of taking credit for a job well done, he does something very typical for his time but untypical of the good learner when he
praises God for the result, shown by the cluster of the word “reflect” mentioned above. To look at the final result and blame or thank something outside oneself and to forget about the process that has lead to success or failure, is characteristic of the fixed mindset as described by Dweck (6). One reason for the divergence in Robinson’s character might be that it is a product of the culture and the time in which the book was written; not to praise God for taking such good care of him on the island, even though he did it all by himself, was simply not acceptable.

After this passage Robinson continues to further organise life on the island and we learn how he addresses the problem of worn-out clothes, how he creates an umbrella and a canoe and how he combines the two, so that he has protection from the sun while fishing. He then adds a sail to his canoe and by doing so he can begin to explore the waters around the coast of the island. Robinson sums up the passage himself by expressing that he has improved himself in “all the mechanic exercises” and that he could in deed have been called a “carpenter” by this time (54).

Next comes the famous part where Friday is saved and his captors killed. This is indeed a section where Robinson reflects and plans a great deal, but the long passage of planning and making decisions leads up to a single incident and as such it is hard to say whether Robinson actually learns anything or not. Reflective thought is part of a self-regulating process where one gives feedback on and assesses one’s own learning. When it comes to assessment and feedback, today’s most influential scholars within this area seem to agree on one thing: how powerful the feedback and assessment is cannot be judged until a new attempt, based on the feedback given, is made. Both Helen Timperley and John Hattie in “The Power of Feedback” (86-87) and Dylan Williams and Paul Black in “Inside the Black Box” (6-9) argue along these lines. However, since Robinson does not give himself feedback on this plan or on the plan later executed, when he saves more prisoners from the cannibals, no learning can be shown to have taken place and no “train of thought” ever starts rolling (How We Think, 3).
In conclusion, it may be argued that the last part of the story does not add to or change the image of Robinson the learner that I have advocated. Like the beginning of the story, it summarises a journey without going into detail. There is, for instance, an almost complete absence of the word “reflect” in this part, but I could not find the same relationship between this fact and the presence of reflective thoughts as before.

**Conclusion and Final Discussion**

Using a digital version of the text made it easier to form an overall picture of how the language reflects the content. This was helpful when analysing, for example, what words were used the most versus the least and if they were used in specific parts or were evenly distributed in the text. To me the most valuable advantage of this method has been the possibility to compare the results it yielded to my own notes and in doing so, I feel that I have found some interesting contradictions and patterns. What is most salient is the fact that there was a negative correlation between the occurrences of the word “reflect” and the passages I had marked as containing reflective thoughts, a fact that led to two interesting discussions that were of importance for my conclusions. First, the discussion of how the significance of the word “reflect” might have changed over time sheds light on the importance of being aware of the text as part of a historical situation – the gap between its cultural origin and its reception context. Second, I feel that the negative correlation and the etymological discussion have helped me describe how a search like this one can highlight what it is we do not look for. By finding the occurrences of “reflect” and by showing that the meaning of the word has changed, the results that show where reflective thought does occur have become more prominent.

A thought that has been with me from the start of this analysis is that I might be stating the obvious, that the novel is reflective by its nature and that I am chasing my own tail. However, in my opinion, this has proven not to be the case. Instead I was able to show that the narrative
style was of crucial importance for reflective thoughts to be probable or even possible. In the first part of the novel, for example, I found almost no instances of reflective thoughts, but in the middle section there were plenty. The first part is told in a summarising style, especially so when it comes to situations of learning; in the beginning Robinson simply retells a story and then sporadically informs the reader what was learned from it. There are sections like these in later parts of the novel as well since many years are reduced to a short passage where we are briefly told what was done, changed or developed. In sections like these, it is impossible to identify reflective thoughts because we do not know if Robinson made many attempts or just one, nor if there was ever any feedback given and hence whether any learning process was ever produced. In contrast, the passages where reflective thought is clearly present, found mainly during the middle section of the story, are told in a narrative style focusing on details. It thus seems as if the narrative style dictates whether reflective thought can be expressed or not.

The mindset of the character is more easily expressed and does not seem as sensitive to the narrative style. I find expressions of Robinson’s mindset both during the beginning and the middle of the story. The most interesting discovery was that Robinson often expresses a fixed mindset with words whereas real growth is visible in his actions.

My analysis of the divergence that this creates in Robinson’s character is that he indeed possesses a growth mindset while his words are the result of the time and culture of the book’s creation. This is noticeable in many passages of the story, for example, in those detailing how he acts when leaving his parents and how he does not give up when pirates capture him. Yet another example is how he both sets up the appropriate mindset to survive and still is unable to see that he is the ruler of his destiny when instead he gives the credit to God.

Another reason that Robinson may be said to thus reduce his own role in the organisation of life on the island is to be found in the fact that it is hard to highlight the effectiveness of one’s own learning process unless one has been taught to do so (Dweck, 60-62). In other words, it is
hard to express in words what one expresses in action without the proper schooling and even though Robinson is a well educated man, his education regards general learning and sailing not pedagogical theory or metacognitive skills.

When it comes to the reflections Robinson makes I have certainly found examples of it, but maybe most importantly I have found that Robinson does not learn simply by doing, but by reflecting upon what he has done.

I embarked upon this analysis after reading an article by Vandermeersche and Soethaert, which is strongly inspired by Boyd’s *Origin of Stories*. Boyd, Vandermeersche and Soethaert argue that an evolutionary perspective can be used in order to help us understand complex phenomena, such as an educational process (Vandermeersche & Soethart, 2; Boyd, 194). I think that this is certainly true in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*. The theories of mindsets and reflective thought are complex and hard to use, as are any descriptions of human interaction or cognition, especially in real life. When applied as a method to analyse literature, however, they become more robust, easier to survey and to understand. By analysing literary characters using theories of education, teachers will have a chance to develop their abilities in order to locate expressions of, in this case, reflective thought and mindsets. Moreover, teaching students to identify such phenomena will allow them to identify with characters as learners and not only, for example, because of the destiny he/she is facing. I thus see a great potential in developing this study, either with a focus on method so that students can use it or by making broader analyses in order to map the learning of other characters, to see whether they express similar properties or if *Robinson Crusoe* is indeed as unique as Rousseau once claimed.

Having said that, I also want to point out that, as the process of writing this essay has developed, I see numerous other ways to re-make or adapt my analysis. For example, I would have liked to further develop either the cultural/sociological perspective of the essay, thus drawing clearer parallels between the text and both its culture of origin and context of reception. Also, I
think that an extension of the linguistic method of searching the text for words and their connotations could be used to even better effect so as to describe how the language of the story affects the metacognitive content. Still, I do think that the results I have produced both serve as a good point of departure for someone else to make those analyses and as an example of how a pedagogical perspective on literature can add to the understanding of characters.

Works cited


Per Pettersson is an upper secondary school teacher of Swedish and History. He is currently employed as first teacher in the municipality of Kinda, Sweden. This essay is the last step in his effort to add the subject of English to his teacher’s certification.