

Reflex, Refraction and Reflection: A Prism for Dialogue

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Abstract: This paper develops and refines the concepts of reflex, reflection and refraction as a framework for analysing and designing reflective dialogue in higher education. The argument responds to a practical problem identified across prior studies of blended and in-class learning that students frequently participate in practical activities without moving beyond routine action unless the activity is deliberately slowed down and analysed. The paper therefore asks: how can educational activities be designed so that students have something to reflect on, a framework within which to reflect, someone to reflect with, and a purpose for reflection? Methodologically, the paper is based on a qualitative document analysis of a corpus of prior studies in Danish higher education that examined dialogue, reflection and lecturer scaffolding in hybrid learning settings. The analysis used iterative coding to identify recurrent forms of reflection, pedagogical arrangements and mediating conditions that supported reflective dialogue. Three cross-case conditions were identified: the sequencing of online and in-person dialogue, the use of structured dialogue formats such as rubrics and question prompts, and the use of technological affordances aligned with students' communicative needs. On this basis, the paper proposes a three-phase model in which reflex denotes undisturbed routine action, refraction denotes a didactic interruption that decomposes experience into analytically manageable elements, and reflection denotes the subsequent synthesis of experience and theory. The paper further develops a typology of hard, soft, diffuse and absorbed reflection to describe different degrees of lecturer involvement. The contribution of the paper is a clearer conceptual vocabulary and a design-oriented framework for linking practice, dialogue and theory in blended higher education.

Keywords: Reflection, Refraction, Dialogue, Blended Learning, Higher Education, Rubrics.

1. Introduction

Reflection and dialogue have long been treated as central to educational practice, from Socratic questioning to contemporary theories of reflective practice and dialogic learning (Padesky, 1993; Paul & Elder, 2007). Yet reflective intentions do not automatically become reflective activity. In higher education, students often complete tasks, placements and practical exercises efficiently, but they do not necessarily examine the assumptions, choices and theoretical implications embedded in what they are doing. This challenge becomes particularly visible in blended learning designs, where students move between independent online activity, peer interaction and classroom teaching. When reflective tasks are experienced merely as compliance requirements, the pedagogical ambition of linking practice and theory remains under-realised.

Prior studies from our research group (Hachmann et al., 2023; Kjærgaard & Hachmann, 2022; Kjærgaard & Dau, 2018; Kjærgaard & Andersen, 2023; Kjærgaard et al., 2025) identified this problem through recurring observations in in-class and blended-learning designs. The studies argue that students often move from practical action to more reflective dialogue only when their routine activity is interrupted by a purposeful pedagogical disturbance. This current paper preserves that core insight while reorganising the argument into a conventional academic structure. The central claim is that lecturers can design for reflective dialogue by creating moments of didactic deceleration in which complex activity is broken down into analytically manageable elements.

This paper asks the following research question:

How can educational activities be designed so that students have something to reflect on, a framework within which to reflect, someone to reflect with, and something to reflect for?

To answer this question, the paper synthesises findings from a corpus of prior studies concerning dialogue and reflection in higher education and uses that synthesis to develop a conceptual framework for educational design.

The paper makes two contributions. First, it clarifies the relationship between reflex, refraction and reflection, thereby offering a vocabulary for describing what happens when routine action is transformed into analytical dialogue. Secondly, it identifies design conditions that support such transformation in blended and peer-learning environments. The paper proceeds with a review of relevant studies and theoretical foundations, followed by an account of the analytical procedure, the presentation of findings, and a discussion of implications for teaching and learning in higher education.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Reflection, Self-Reflection and Dialogue

The paper adopts a broad understanding of reflection as analytical thinking oriented towards experience, action and understanding (Di Stefano et al., 2023; Dohn et al., 2018; Kjærgaard & Georgsen, 2021; Turns et al., 2015). Within that broad category, self-reflection is treated as a more specific form of reflection directed towards one's own role, judgement and possibilities for action. This distinction matters because learning designs may support reflection on an external object, reflection on one's practice, or reflection on oneself as a participant in practice. In higher education, these dimensions might often overlap, particularly in professional education where students continuously move between doing, interpreting and evaluating.

Thus, the prior studies indicate that questioning has a foundational role in reflective pedagogy. The Socratic tradition illustrates how clarifying, assumption-testing and implication-oriented questions can prompt learners to articulate and examine what would otherwise remain tacit (Padesky, 1993; Paul & Elder, 2007). In this paper, such questioning is not understood as a generic teaching technique but as a design principle, thus, reflective learning requires prompts that focus attention on selected features of experience and sustain inquiry rather than closure.

Dialogue is defined here as thinking together through language (Baucal, 2010; Kjærgaard, 2016; Littleton & Howe, 2010; Mercer et al., 2017; Sorensen & Kjærgaard, 2016). This definition distinguishes dialogue from forms of conversation centred on winning, defending or merely exchanging positions. In dialogic learning, participants listen, respond, reconsider and elaborate their understandings in relation to one another (Howe, 2010). Dialogue is in this context, therefore, both a medium and a method for reflection. It is the medium because reflective thought becomes tangible when expressed through language, and it is a method because carefully structured dialogue can guide learners towards the essential aspects of an experience, problem or text.

2.2 From Reflection to Refraction

The notion of refraction is adopted from Pagano and Roselle's use of the term to describe a process through which learning is broken down into intermediate processes that support critical thinking (Pagano & Roselle, 2009). They propose the following:

"We propose to move towards the concept of refraction through reflective practice. Refraction focuses on critical thinking skills and problem solving. The refraction process helps students understand and identify the intermediate processes of learning that aid the development of critical thinking skills" (Pagano & Roselle, 2009, p. 220)

In the present framework, refraction names the pedagogical moment in which a lecturer, peer or mediating artefact slows down a learner's activity and separates it into constituent elements (Wagenschein, 2012). The metaphor of the prism is useful because it captures both interruption and analytic differentiation. Thus, it becomes a complex process and where the activity is made available for examination in parts.

This idea is compatible with Schön's account of reflection-in-action, where practitioners think within action rather than only after it (Schön, Donald A., 2017). However, the present paper specifies the pedagogical conditions that make such reflection more likely in educational settings. Whereas routine action may remain tacit and self-confirming, refraction introduces a deliberate disturbance that invites analysis. The disturbance can take the form of targeted lecturer questions, a rubric, a digital prompt, a peer-feedback protocol or a sequence in which online dialogue prepares later classroom analysis.

The framework also draws on Vygotskian perspectives on mediation and the role of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (Vygotsky, Lev S., 2012). If dialogue is the primary medium through which reflection becomes socially available, then the lecturer's role is not only to ask questions but to mediate attention, sequence participation and help learners identify what is educationally significant. In this sense, refraction is a mediated and relational process rather than an individual cognitive event.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The paper uses qualitative document analysis to re-examine a corpus of prior studies on dialogue and reflection in higher education. The purpose of the analysis was not to aggregate effect sizes or evaluate interventions quantitatively, but to develop a coherent conceptual framework from a set of related studies that addressed comparable pedagogical concerns. Document analysis was selected because the source material consisted of published papers and associated analytical accounts that already contained empirical observations, design descriptions and interpretations relevant to the research question.

The corpus comprises prior studies undertaken in Danish higher education and reported across publications between 2016 and 2023 (Kjærgaard & Hachmann, 2022; Kjærgaard & Sorensen, 2016; Kjærgaard & Dau, 2018; Kjærgaard, 2019, 2020; Kjærgaard & Georgsen, 2021; Kjærgaard & Andersen, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2022; Valbak-Andersen et al., 2021). Across the corpus, the studies examine dialogue and reflection in hybrid learning settings that combine online interaction with in-person teaching, and they share an explicit interest in how lecturers scaffold student dialogue and reflection through designed activities. The studies vary in immediate emphasis, covering online forums, inter-lesson reflections, peer-feedback rubrics and emergent learning networks, but they are connected by their common concern with mediated reflective practice.

3.2 Selection of Studies

The selection strategy was purposive rather than exhaustive. Studies were included when they met three criteria: first, they focused explicitly on dialogue, reflection or reflective practice in higher education; secondly, they described a designed pedagogical arrangement, such as a hybrid sequence, structured dialogue format or digital mediation; and thirdly, they contained interpretive material that made it possible to analyse how reflective processes were scaffolded.

This purposive selection was appropriate because the aim of the paper was conceptual refinement rather than comprehensive mapping of the field. The studies functioned as a theoretically meaningful corpus through which recurrent pedagogical mechanisms could be identified and compared.

3.2.1 Introduction to Selected Studies

The papers *“Reflection, Dialogue, and Hybrid Learning Spaces”* (Kjærgaard & Georgsen, 2021) and *“Inter-lesson Reflections: Learning through Interrogative and Reflective Dialogue”* (Kjærgaard & Andersen, 2023) investigated how a combination of online dialogues and in-class dialogues can scaffold deeper reflection. These studies concluded that preceding online dialogues effectively scaffold and enrich subsequent in-class dialogues. Furthermore, the archived online dialogue itself becomes an object for reflection, as students later use it as a springboard or prism for further discussion.

Another set of studies, *“Utilising Digital Technology for Dialogue and Evaluation”* (Kjærgaard, 2016) and *“Designing for Dialogue and Digitality in Higher and Continuing Education”* (Sorensen & Kjærgaard, 2016), explored how an asynchronous online discussion could be structured with specific didactic guidelines (such as preparatory readings, structured response formats, etc.) to support deeper dialogues reminiscent of classic scholastic conversation. These studies found that framed and directed dialogues, with clear structures and roles, serve as explicit objects of reflection, and that a well-defined framework for discussion can act as a prism that reveals the elements of the dialogue as discrete parts for examination. However, these particular studies focused on written, asynchronous academic dialogues and did not incorporate real-world practice elements, so they primarily highlight the potential of structured scholastic dialogue.

Additional studies, in particular *“Backchannels: Covert Digital Backchannels in the Overt Classroom”* (Kjærgaard & Hachmann, 2022) and *“Emerging Networks – Disturbed Learning Trajectories and New Ways of Connectivity at University Colleges”* (Hachmann et al., 2023), investigated dynamic learning networks that emerged from student-initiated communication in specific situations. These studies found that certain technological affordances (like online forums or backchannels) combined with an authentic student *need* for dialogue created excellent conditions for networked learning. Notably, the students’ actual needs for understanding the topic and task in the context acted as an impetus for reflection, effectively functioning as a prism through which key elements were brought into focus.

Synthesising insights from these empirical studies identified three key conditions that seem to function as a prism that breaks the learning process into elements and thereby focusing students' reflection:

- Blending online and in-person dialogue: A combination of online dialogues (preceding a class session) and subsequent face-to-face dialogues provides scaffolding. The online discussion effectively refracts the learning experience into elements that the later in-class dialogue can analyse more deeply.
- Structured dialogue formats: Dialogues that are intentionally framed with clear guidelines or roles (for example, using rubrics or predetermined question prompts) create better conditions for students to explore and reflect on distinct elements of the learning process. The structure itself refracts the learning content into pieces that can be separately examined.
- Technology aligned with student needs: Thoughtfully chosen technological tools, aligned with students' authentic needs for communication or feedback, can highlight specific aspects of the content or experience, turning them into opportunities for reflection. The technology's affordances can act as a prism that draws attention to elements of the learning process which might otherwise remain implicit.

3.3 Coding and Theme Development

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the publications were read to identify passages describing reflective activity, student participation, lecturer interventions and the role of mediating artefacts or technologies. Secondly, these passages were coded descriptively for instances of reflection, self-reflection, dialogue, questioning, scaffolding, timing, technological mediation and the object of reflection. Thirdly, the coded material was compared across the selected studies in order to identify recurring pedagogical conditions that appeared to support reflective dialogue. Fourthly, these patterns were synthesised into broader themes and connected to the theoretical concepts of reflex, refraction and reflection.

Coding was iterative and comparative rather than strictly linear. Initial codes were refined as the analysis progressed, particularly where similar pedagogical mechanisms appeared under different labels across the studies. For example, online questioning, rubric-guided peer feedback and digital posting activities were initially coded separately, but later brought together under the broader analytical theme of structured refraction because each design decomposed experience into discussable elements. The analysis was informed by the iterative, data-responsive logic associated with grounded theory, although the study did not claim to generate formal grounded theory.

3.4 Analytical Procedure and Limitations

The analytical procedure was abductive, and the themes were derived from the source material and then interpreted in dialogue with theory. This meant that empirical regularities in the corpus were used to refine the conceptual framework, while concepts from Schön, Vygotsky, Pagano and Roselle, and dialogic learning research helped to specify the educational significance of the patterns identified. The outcome is therefore a practice-oriented theoretical framework grounded in prior studies rather than a report of newly generated primary data.

This methodological choice has limits. Because the analysis synthesises a bounded corpus of related studies, the findings should be understood as conceptually generative rather than universally representative. Moreover, the corpus is anchored in higher education contexts in Denmark, and the framework should therefore be transferred to other settings with appropriate contextual sensitivity.

4. Findings

4.1 Three Design Conditions that Function as Pedagogical Prisms

The cross-case analysis identified three recurring conditions that helped transform routine participation into reflective dialogue. Together, these conditions functioned as pedagogical prisms because they directed attention towards selected elements of a learning experience and made those elements available for discussion.

The first condition was the sequencing of online and in-person dialogue. In several studies, online discussion before a class session helped students externalise questions, observations and tentative understandings that could later be revisited and analysed in class. The archived online dialogue became an object of reflection in its

own right. Rather than treating online interaction as preparatory administration, these designs used it to create a first analytical layer that enriched subsequent face-to-face dialogue.

The second condition was the use of structured dialogue formats. When discussion was organised through explicit rubrics, prompts, role descriptions or questioning protocols (answers to posts should end in new questions), students were better able to identify what they were meant to examine and how they were expected to contribute. Structure did not close down reflection; instead, it provided a frame within which reflection could become more precise. Rubrics were particularly powerful because they named evaluative dimensions and thereby refracted a complex performance into discussable criteria.

The third condition concerned technology aligned with students' authentic communicative needs. Digital platforms such as discussion posts, Padlet boards and polling tools became productive when their affordances matched the communicative task at hand. In such cases, technology did not merely deliver content but mediated the reflective process by preserving traces of thinking, enabling comparison of contributions or foregrounding student questions. When the technology was meaningfully linked to the students' need to ask, respond, compare or prioritise, it supported more focused reflective activity.

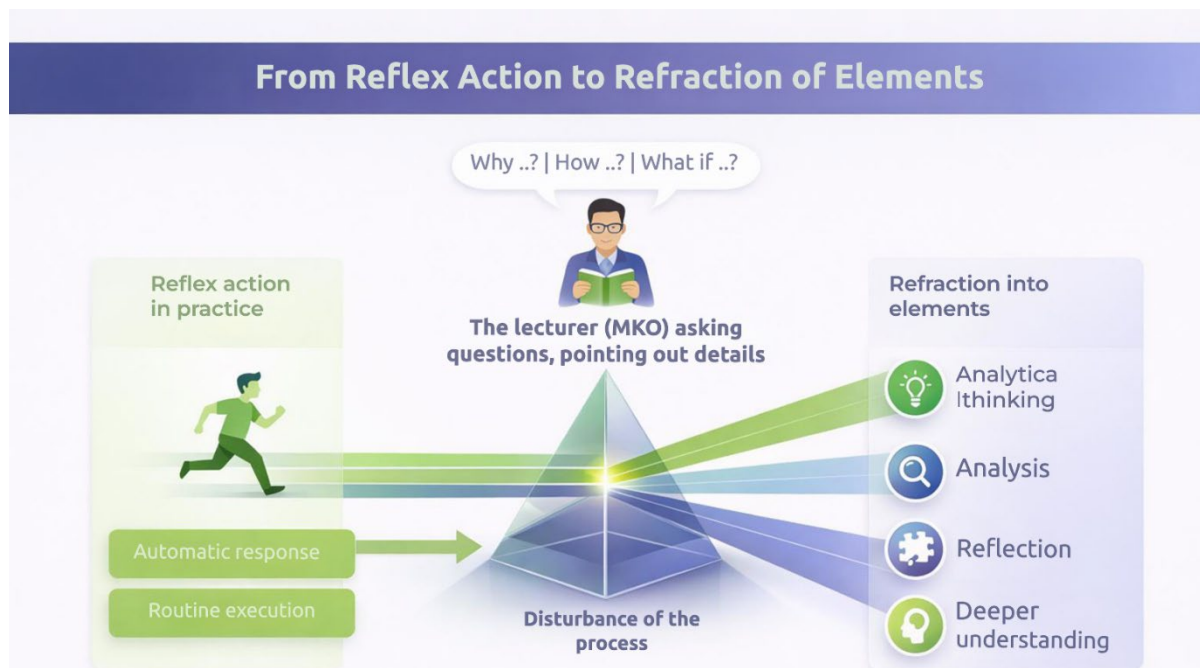


Figure 1: Conceptual model: from reflex action to refraction of elements (made with CoPilot).

4.2 The Reflex–Refraction–Reflection Framework

The thematic synthesis supports a three-phase framework. Reflex denotes routine, often efficient action in which the learner responds within practice without stepping back from the immediate demands of the situation. Such action is not deficient; indeed, professional work often depends upon routinised competence. The educational problem arises when routine action remains pedagogically opaque and learners do not examine what informs it.

Refraction denotes the intervening pedagogical act that slows down the process and separates it into elements. It is the moment of didactic deceleration in which a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), such as a lecturer, peer or artefact introduces a question, category, pause or comparison that makes a previously tacit activity discussable (Vygotsky, Lev S., 2012; Vygotsky, Lev Semenovitch & Cole, 1978). Refraction is therefore neither identical with reflex nor with reflection. It is the analytically generative turning point between them. In the refraction stage, the lecturer's task is to break the student's experience or expression (an utterance, a written text, a demonstration, etc.) into elemental parts, helping the student examine and understand each of these fundamental components and how they connect (as depicted in Figure 1). This approach is inspired by Wagenschein's *exemplary principle* (Wagenschein, 1951; Wagenschein & Horton-Kriiger, 2000), which advocates selecting teaching content that can be broken down into fundamental, representative elements.

Reflection denotes the subsequent process of analysis and synthesis through which the learner connects experience, concepts and possible future action. Reflection may occur during action, shortly after it or across a more extended period, but in each case, it depends on some means of revisiting and reorganising experience (Schön, Donald A., 2017). In the framework proposed here, refraction is the pedagogical mechanism that makes such revisiting more likely and more disciplined.

Table 1: Decelerations of learning process through the prism of refraction

Phase	Primary Learner Activity	Role of Lecturer or Mediating Artefact	Pedagogical Outcome
Reflex	Routine action in practice; tacit or automatic responding	Observation, task framing or background support without direct interruption	Continuation of activity without explicit analytical breakdown
Refraction	Attention shifts from acting to examining selected elements of the activity	Questions, prompts, rubrics, peer protocols or technologies interrupt and focus the process	Didactic deceleration; elements of the activity become discussable
Reflection	Analysis, comparison, conceptualisation and synthesis	Support for linking experience to theory, alternatives and implications	New understanding, reframed judgement and possible adaptation of practice

4.3 Types of Reflection

The analysis also indicated that reflection varies according to the timing and intensity of pedagogical support. To describe this variation, the paper retains the typology of hard, soft, diffuse and absorbed reflection, but presents it more explicitly as a design heuristic rather than as a claim about fixed learner types. The typology is inspired by Schöns work on the Reflective Practitioner (Schön, Donald, 1987; Schön, Donald A., 2017)

Hard reflection refers to immediate and systematic lecturer involvement. It occurs when questioning or feedback is closely coupled to the action itself, enabling reflection in action. Soft reflection refers to delayed but still intentional support, for instance when students formulate reflections independently and then return to them in a facilitated dialogue. Diffuse reflection occurs when learners are expected to reflect largely on their own, with limited or inconsistent guidance. Absorbed reflection designates situations in which no meaningful pedagogical support for reflection is present, so any reflective work depends entirely on the learner's own initiative.

Table 2: Reflection typology

Type of Reflection	Degree of Support	Typical Timing	Illustrative Educational Use
Hard reflection	High and direct	During or immediately within the activity	Live questioning, coached performance, tightly guided inquiry
Soft reflection	Moderate and indirect	Shortly after the activity	Inter-lesson writing, facilitated sharing, rubric-guided peer feedback
Diffuse reflection	Low or irregular	After activity or over time	Independent journaling with sparse follow-up
Absorbed reflection	Absent	No structured reflective timing	Task completion without dialogic or analytical support

4.4 Illustrative Examples from the Corpus

One group of studies used a questioning protocol in which students ended posts with further questions and responded to peers through additional questions. This design foregrounded inquiry itself and pushed students to unpack a topic progressively. In analytical terms, the question protocol worked as a mechanism of hard reflection because it required participants to interrogate the topic continuously and made the boundaries of the inquiry explicit.

A second example was the use of inter-lesson reflections. Students completed written reflections between meetings and then discussed these materials in the following class session. This design shifted part of the refractive work into the time between lessons. The written posts served as objects of reflection that could be revisited, compared and elaborated with peers. The process is best understood as soft reflection because the students engaged initially on their own but later returned to their entries in structured classroom dialogue.

A third example concerned rubric-mediated peer feedback. Here the rubric itself acted as a prism by naming the dimensions through which student work should be examined. Because attention was directed towards specific categories, peer dialogue could move beyond general praise or criticism and towards more precise analytical judgements. The design redistributed some of the lecturer's refractive role to students and artefacts, illustrating how structured peer-learning can support reflection without constant lecturer intervention.

Across these examples, technologies were not pedagogically important in themselves but because of how they stored, organised and foregrounded contributions. Discussion platforms preserved the trace of online dialogue; Padlet boards assembled reflections into a shared visual field; and polling tools enabled collective prioritisation of contributions. In each case, the technology became educationally meaningful when it helped make selected elements of the learning process visible and discussable.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the chief pedagogical value of refraction lies in didactic deceleration. The analysis of the prior studies indicate that students do not necessarily fail to reflect because they lack knowledge or experience, however, they often fail to reflect because educational designs do not create adequate occasions for pausing, focusing and analysing. Refraction names the intervention through which complexity is temporarily reduced to discussable elements. This matters in professional and practice-based education, where learners are often required to respond quickly and may therefore remain within action rather than gaining perspective on it.

The framework also clarifies the lecturer's role. The lecturer is not positioned as the sole source of knowledge but as the designer or mediator of reflective conditions. In some designs, the lecturer asks the refractive questions directly. In others, the lecturer delegates part of that role to peers, rubrics or digital artefacts. What remains constant is the need for a pedagogical arrangement that identifies what should be examined and keeps the dialogue oriented towards understanding rather than mere task completion.

The distinction between hard, soft, diffuse and absorbed reflection is useful because it makes visible the consequences of different levels of pedagogical support. Strong guidance may be necessary when learners are new to a field, when tasks are conceptually demanding or when tacit practice needs to be surfaced quickly. Softer forms of reflection may be more appropriate when the aim is to extend and compare learner-generated interpretations. Diffuse and absorbed forms can also occur, but the analysis suggests that relying on them as default arrangements is unlikely to support deep reflective dialogue consistently.

These points have practical implications for blended learning. Productive blended design is not achieved simply by adding online activities to face-to-face teaching. Instead, the analysis of the prior studies indicates that the sequence and function of activities matter. Online dialogue becomes powerful when it creates material that can be revisited and discussed later, rubrics become powerful when they name dimensions of analysis, and technologies become powerful when their affordances align with the reflective task. In this regard, refraction provides a useful design lens for deciding how a learning activity will move from action to analysis and from analysis to synthesis.

6. Conclusion

This paper seeks to reformulate and strengthen a conceptual argument about reflective dialogue in higher education by presenting it within a conventional academic structure and by making the analytical procedure explicit. The synthesis of prior studies indicates that reflective dialogue is most likely to emerge when educational designs provide a clear object of reflection, a frame for interpreting that object, interlocutors with whom to think, and an educational purpose for the reflective work.

The proposed framework distinguishes among reflex, refraction and reflection. Reflex refers to routine action; refraction refers to the pedagogical interruption that decomposes activity into analytically manageable elements; and reflection refers to the subsequent synthesis of experience, dialogue and theory. Together with the typology of hard, soft, diffuse and absorbed reflection, the framework offers a vocabulary for analysing existing learning designs and for planning new ones.

The most important implication is that reflection should not be treated as a vague aspiration appended to teaching, but as an outcome requiring deliberate design. Further research could test the framework in additional educational contexts and examine how different pedagogical prisms shape the quality of reflective dialogue across disciplines and levels of expertise.

Ethics Statement

The paper is based on previously reported studies. The original datasets are described as anonymised and reported without personally identifiable information. No new empirical data were collected for the present synthesis.

AI Declaration

AI was used in the original submission to generate one illustrative figure. AI is an integral part of the search tools (NotebookLM) used for this study for wordings and alternative formulation.

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