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What is Reflective Practice?

Reflective Practice is the foundation of professional development; it makes meaning from experience and transforms insights into practical strategies for personal growth and organisational impact.

It involves integrating activities into daily life on a routine basis which raise awareness, prompt critical analysis and aid self-management and decision-making. It means:

- Learning to pay attention – listening to ourselves
- Coming face to face with our assumptions
- Noticing patterns
- Changing what we see
- Changing the way we see.

We often assume learning is a discreet activity which involves reading books, attending courses, perhaps participating in action learning or working with a coach. But we are learning all the time; from everything we do, every conversation we have, every strand of information that comes our way. Reflective Practice is a way of recognising and articulating what we're learning on a moment by moment basis. Children learn by creating new connections in the brain and putting them together in sequences. Adults, however, already have a brain full of connections, and reorganising existing knowledge – sometimes referred to as unlearning – is an essential component of the process. Each adult learner has a unique set of experiences, mental models and assumptions. Restructuring and re-ordering what is known requires active, engaged participation in the learning process, relating ideas and concepts to personal experience. Research shows that for this to happen the new knowledge needs to be of practical and personal value to the learner. Adults commit to learning when they can connect it to their goals and aspirations.

What is the role of reflection in professional learning?

Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting enables us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how each increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment to the wider perspective of learning - heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Through reflection, learning is integrated, internalised and personalised.

Thinking about an experience is essentially a cognitive activity, but reflection is also emotional and physical, and is linked with our values and social identity. Viewing issues from different perspectives challenges assumptions and established patterns of behaviour, and encourages the development of new ways of seeing.

Transformational theories suggest that adult learning is principally a meaning-making activity; that acquiring job-specific skills and spending time on continuous professional development creates the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of self as learner as well as acquire a body of knowledge. This is often referred to as double loop learning.

What is the difference between reflection and Reflective Practice?

An important characteristic of Reflective Practice rather than reflection is the fact that it is captured and expressed in some form - usually written, spoken or pictorial - on a systematic basis.

This is because learning comes not only from the 'in the head' reflection but from the process of representing the reflection itself. What you learn from drawing a picture to represent reflections differs from what you learn by writing about the same content. In making a representation of reflection, we shape and model the content in different ways depending on a range of factors, including how we are feeling at the time and whether other people will see what we've made.

When the process of representation becomes a habitual activity, patterns and connections become visible.

How does Reflective Practice improve personal and professional effectiveness?

Reflective Practice is an essential part of developing new skills, but at a deeper level it grows the capacity of the individual to respond to challenges, make timely decisions, manage emotions, conduct productive relationships and cope with stress.

We know from neuroscience that a structure in the brain called the corpus callosum plays an important part in performance. The corpus callosum is a thick band of nerve fibres that connects the left and right sides of the brain, transferring information between the brain hemispheres. It is true that the two hemispheres have locations involved with different functions i.e. within the left side of the brain a dominance in analytical thinking, language processing and drawing on existing knowledge to solve problems, while within the right side of the brain there is more of an association with intuition, creativity and understanding through metaphor and visualisation. However we shouldn't be thinking we are more left or right brained as we are all whole brained and need processing to occur in both hemispheres. Reflective practice can help re-visit and strengthen neuronal connections we need to develop new habits/skills/mindsets within and between the two hemispheres.

For individuals, the outcomes of developing a regular habit of reflective practice can be:

- An increase in self-awareness, emotional intelligence, the capacity for emotional regulation and as a consequence the ability to inspire, influence and motivate others
- An enhanced ability to make decisions which show good judgement, awareness of risk and systemic impact
- A growth in the capacity to generate innovation through the technique of asking open questions and attending to the answers with an open mind
- The ability to be compassionate to self and others and inspire trust through demonstrating trustworthiness.

Reflective Practice expands a leader's self-awareness, brings rigour to critical thinking and hones communication skills, all of which enable greater impact at an organisational level as ways of working and working relationships are being challenged by a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. It aligns with a range of organisational development issues, such as ethics, engagement, empowerment, well-being and sustainability. *"Reflective Practice has been a good use of my time"*, commented a senior leader in an international aid charity.

How can I become a reflective practitioner?

1. The first stage of becoming a reflective practitioner is to develop the skill of critically reflecting on experience, or what Donald Schon described as 'the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning'. There are four stages to this process: Re-inhabit (relive the experience), Reflect (notice what was going on), Review (critically analyse the situation), Reframe (capture new understanding).
2. The second stage of reflective practice Schon calls reflection in action, and can best be described as the ability to think on one's feet. This involves noticing patterns of thoughts, feelings and physical responses as they happen, and using this information to choose what to do moment by moment.
3. We can usefully add a third stage, reflection for action, which combines insight with intention to apply learning in professional life.

There is no magic formula for developing as a reflective practitioner. But here are some guidelines to get you started:

- **Time.** The most often cited reason why learners skimp on reflective practice is a lack of time. Build reflective time into your learning schedule; even a few minutes on a regular basis is better than trying to catch up occasionally. Like all habits, little and often is the most effective.
- **Attention.** Make a conscious effort to minimise distractions. Put the phone out of earshot and sight line. If you're writing directly on your computer, you may want to go offline to prevent emails coming in and attracting your attention. Find a space where you're not likely to be interrupted and consider headphones in a noisy environment.
- **Pace.** Slow down. If mindfulness works for you, then use this as a way of locating yourself in the present. A minute of breathing from the diaphragm – breathe in for a count of four, hold for a count of four and breathe out for a count of four – will also encourage a reflective brain state. Even if you only have a few minutes for your reflective practice, make each minute count.
- **Curiosity.** Approach your reflective practice without judgement or self-criticism. There is no 'one right way' to do this. You are doing this for yourself, not for anyone else.
- **Experiment.** In the next section we suggest a range of tools you can use to enable reflection and encourage you to experiment to find what works for you.

What methods can I use to develop my Reflective Practice?

Preparing for reflective practice – encouraging a reflective mind

Free Writing

This is a good way to get started on any reflective writing activity, as it unblocks the mental barriers of apathy, self-criticism, resentment, and anxiety about deadlines, fear of failure or censure, or other forms of resistance. It is often used by professional writers as a warm-up exercise. You can do this on a computer, but the added physical dimension of moving a pen across paper helps to create a calm and receptive brain state.

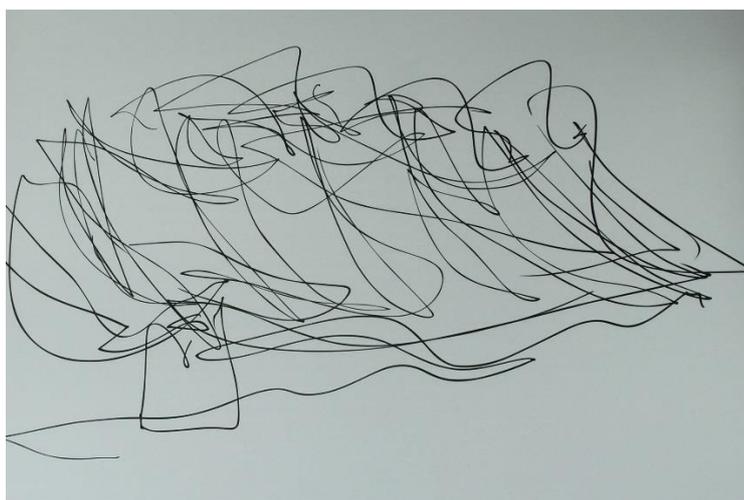
Give yourself a time limit – four to six minutes works well. Keep your hand moving until the time is up. Do not pause to stare into space or to read what you've written. Write quickly but not in a hurry.

Pay no attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, neatness, or style. The correctness and quality of what you write do not matter; the act of writing does. If you get off the topic or run out of ideas, write whatever comes into your head, or simply scribble: anything to keep the hand moving.

At the end of the allotted time, re-read what you've written and underline any words that jump out as of significance.

Free drawing

The architect Frank Gehry (the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Concert Hall in LA) starts every new commission by sitting with a blank sheet of paper and a pencil and moving his hand in response to the ideas, feelings and images that the work suggests. He doesn't take his hand from the paper, or worry about structure or detail. Instead, he allows himself to fully connect emotionally, intellectually and physically with the task at hand. It was this process that provided the inspiration for the swelling titanium curves of the Guggenheim. Whether we're working - on an architectural icon, an HR strategy or thinking about a difficult negotiation - using the physical activity of drawing shapes on paper liberates our thinking.



Focus on breathing

One or two minutes of purposeful breathing is a good preparation for Reflective Practice because it encourages the production of alpha brain waves which are responsible for reducing distraction and increasing the capacity to focus.

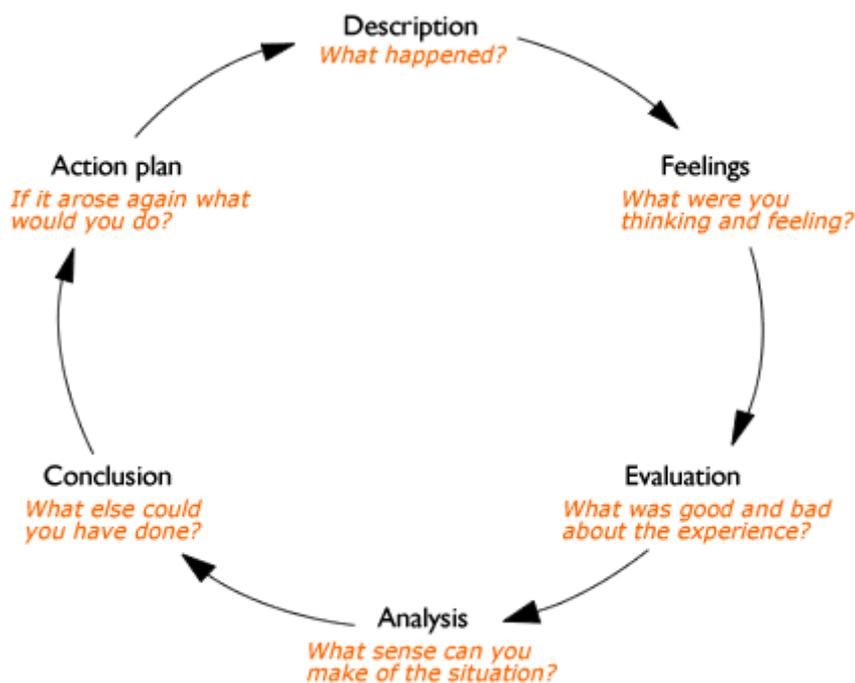
Simply sit or stand somewhere you will not be disturbed and concentrate on your breathing. Start by breathing in and out slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth – each cycle should take around six seconds.

Let go of thinking about the day's activities, the things that are concerning you, and direct all your attention to the flow of air in and out of the body for a count of 10 -20 breaths.

Tools for reflective practice

1. Critical analysis

This questioning framework is based on Gibbs reflective cycle:



Choose a specific situation you would like to reflect on. Work through the following questions and write down the answers.

DESCRIPTION

When and where did the situation take place?
Why were you there?
Who else was there?
What happened?
What did you do?
What didn't you do?
What did they do?
What didn't they do?
What happened?

FEELINGS

What were your feelings before this situation?
What were your feelings at the time?
What were your feelings afterwards?
What do you think the others in the situation were feeling?

EVALUATION

What went well / was positive? Why?
What did not go so well / was less positive? Why?
What was your contribution?
What was the contribution of others?

ANALYSIS

What assumptions are you making?
What insights are now available to you?

CONCLUSION and ACTION PLAN

What will you do differently?
What skills do you need to develop to achieve this?
Who and what will support your development in this area?

Use the answers to the questions in the final section to feed into your personal development plan.

2. *Visualisation*

LANDSCAPING: Use pebbles, shells, buttons - – anything you have easily to hand that can be used to represent aspects of your work system. Working briskly, lay them out in a pattern which represents the issue you want to reflect on. What do you notice? Try moving one or two items – what happens now? What else could you do with the items? What do the answers to these questions suggest about your future options?

MIND-MAPPING: You may use mind-mapping software, create electronic maps on a tablet with a stylus or prefer pen and paper, but using a mind-map to represent the Reinhabit – Reflect – Review – Reframe process is a good way of capturing the pattern of your reflection and reorganising your ideas to incorporate new insights.

3. **Reflective dialogues**

Using Isaacs' model of dialogue as a conversation tool with a group of fellow learners is a powerful way of creating space for reflection. The four principles of dialogue are:

- Listening to understand others rather than to plan what you're going to say;
- Suspending judgement and criticism
- Voicing, or speaking in the first person rather than abstractly
- Respecting the views of others and their right to hold them.

A dialogue can be used as a way of exploring experiences, planning future actions, and enabling participants to benefit from others' insights into their personal challenges.

4. **Narrative reflective writing**

This is often used as a follow-on from free writing, and uses the same approach, this time as a way of telling a story about something you want to reflect on in your work life.

- a) Focus on the experience and use the process of telling the story to re-inhabit the events emotionally as well as intellectually. Writing the story in the first person as though it was a fiction encourages curiosity and creativity in the way you recall and reorder detail. Allow around 20 minutes to tell the story and try to write without stopping and editing. Let the story tell itself.
- b) At the end of 20 minutes, go back over the story and add any details or new insights as you do so. Notice underlying links, fresh understanding and awareness. Stay away from criticism, and resist the temptation to come up with answers.
- c) Share your writing with a colleague or fellow students. Reading out loud what you've written is a powerful way of connecting with insights, but you can also share it virtually in an appropriately secure and confidential online environment.
- d) Rewrite the story in the light of the insights you have gained from the first part of the process. What does the reworking of the story suggest for your development?

Keeping a reflective journal

Choose a format that you will be able to access regularly; a small notebook you can carry with you if you prefer pen and paper, or a tablet you keep with you during the day. The importance of accessibility is so you can capture thoughts and feelings in the moment, as well as reflecting on situations after they have occurred. Little and often is better than trying to do all your journaling once or twice a week.

Find a style that suits you – notes, bullet points, narrative writing and graphic notation. The form needs to reflect your learning style and way of processing information.

It can be helpful to divide 'pages' (physical or virtual) into first stage reflection and second stage reflection by drawing a line down the middle of the page and using the left hand column for contemporaneous reflections. After a few days, go back over a number of pages and see where there are themes and patterns coming up in what has been written. What are you noticing? What might this mean for future learning and strategies? Capture your insights in the right hand column.

Further Reading:

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