

CHAPTER 4

REFLECTIVE THINKING AND WRITING

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REFLECTIVE THINKING AND WRITING

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the question: what is reflective thinking? What is it for and how to use it effectively? There are various definitions of reflective thinking, all of which suggest it to be a crucial skill for one's personal development. We set out what we mean by reflective practice, convey the importance of reflection to learning and show what are the main difficulties on the way of improving your reflective thinking skills. We also discuss different models of reflective thinking and ways of reflecting in order to help you identifying things that affect your own reflections and learning. You will also find different activities on reflection and learning styles that will make you better able to evaluate your own work, and it may also help you better understand the feedback on your work you receive from others.

OBJECTIVES

After you have completed this module you will be able to:

- work out what you most want to achieve; reflect on and appraise your skills/experience in identifying and meeting your own needs/wants;
- identify opportunities for using and developing your skills in reflecting and learning, to achieve your aims in a range of situations;
- adapt what you do to achieve your aims, trying different ways of reflection and learning to meet new demands and address difficulties;
- critically reflect on your approaches and their effectiveness;
- plan your further development.

DEFINITIONS

Reflective thinking lies somewhere involved with the notion of reflection and learning. We think reflectively in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting. So what is to reflect? Boyd and Fales defined reflection as "... the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (1983: 99).

Boud, Keogh and Walker offer a comprehensive account of the role of reflection in deep learning. They defined reflection as “... a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation” (1985: 3).

Steinaker and Bell (1979) suggest a reflective process believed to be of value in any situation in which change of behaviour is the objective.

THE MODELS OF REFLECTIVE THINKING

There are many theories regarding reflective practice. A straightforward method is to have the *experience*, then *describe* it, *analyse* it and *revise* it (EDAR). This method should help you think about what has happened and then consider ways of changing and/ or improving it.

- *Experience* – a significant event or incident you would like to change or improve.
- *Describe* – aspects such as *who* was involved, *what* happened, *when* it happened and *where* it happened.
- *Analyse* – consider the experience more deeply and ask yourself *how* it happened and *why* it happened.
- *Revise* – think about *how* you would do things differently if the same event happened again and then try this out if you have the opportunity.

If you want to achieve your goals reflection should become a part of your everyday practice. Just apply EDAR when completing your plans. Reflection enables you to look at things in detail that perhaps you would not ordinarily consider. There may be events you would not want to change or improve as you felt they went really well. If this is the case, reflect on *why* they went well and use these strategies or methods in the future. Reflection should become a habit; if you are not able to write everything down, to maintain a reflective journal, just mentally run through the EDAR points when you have time (Gravells, 2010).

Kolb (1984) proposed a four-stage continuous learning process. His theory suggests that without reflection, people would continue to make mistakes.

This model suggests that the cycle can be started at any stage; that reflection is as important as the experience; and that, once the cycle is started, it should be followed through all the stages for learning to be effective.

We can reflect on something afterwards or while the action is actually happening. Reflecting on something afterwards (‘reflection **on** action’, Schon, 1987) helps us identify what we’ve learnt for similar situations in future. Practicing ‘reflection on action’ helps us develop the ability to think about and adapt something while it’s actually happening (‘reflection **in** action’, Schon, 1987). Highly skilled people do this (e.g. comedians think on their feet when dealing with an audience; surgeons adapt their approach if faced with a crisis). Both practices – ‘reflection on action’ and ‘reflection in action’ – help us to make for our goals.



So over recent years, a view of how people learn has developed that sees reflection as absolutely key to learning. *And reflection is the process of thinking about what you are learning/ doing, in order to make sense of it.* If we do something repeatedly without changing it, it may be because haven't thought about the effect it has and what we could do differently.

USING REFLECTION: MANAGING THE PDP PROCESS

What for do we need reflection?

- Personal/Professional Development Planning (PDP): reflecting on your needs, wants, experiences, learning and performance is the basis for the PDP process;
- action planning, identifying actions and recommendations: action planning is an essential aspect of the reflection process and of the PDP process;
- handling time and pressure: this covers planning to meet your development needs as part of PDP, and you won't know what they are without reflection;
- producing portfolios and journals (including diaries, blogs etc): most portfolios and journals rely on the process of reflection for you to identify what to include (Drew & Bingham, 2010).

As one can see, reflection isn't only considered as a key activity in higher education. It is also seen as a key building block for Personal/Professional Development Planning.

So what is PDP?

Personal/professional development planning describes the deliberate process of thinking about and reflecting upon your own:

- personal learning
- performance
- achievements.

PDP focuses on how you can utilize and develop these aspects of your development further, in order to help you achieve your personal, educational and professional goals and aspirations.

A Personal Development Plan is not only used whilst you are on your academic course, as it is currently used by many employers as a way to assess ongoing training and development needs in relation to post-qualifying practice. You may be asked to present your reflections on how you continue your professional development, to manage the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) schemes where it's essential, so it is important to record your reflections. How can you record or present them? There are many ways to do it: you may keep a reflective blog or diary, portfolio of evidence with reflective notes or summaries or you may organise a reflective video/audio. These usually include appraisals and keeping a professional portfolio.

Where courses (or CPD schemes) require reflective activities (or evaluations, selfevaluations or self-assessments), they want something quite specific. They don't want a lot of unconnected thoughts about something but for you to be able to describe or explain:

- what you've learnt;
- what something that you did or thought or experienced 'means';
- what was effective and what evidence you have for this;
- what wasn't effective and what evidence you have for this;
- what you can build on or repeat;
- what you need to improve;
- how you plan to improve it and what specific actions you'll take (Stogdon & Kiteley, 2010).

One can see that managing the PDP means to provide evidence based information on developing your skills.

The PDP is most useful if used as a working document which can be referred to and revisited as you progress on your course. As with most plans, it will no doubt need to be reconsidered and revised according to your progress and in the light of other circumstances that may need to be considered.

You will usually be asked to draw up your PDP with your personal tutor during the early stages of your course and it will comprise of:

- a comprehensive list of your learning needs
- a list of tasks that will show how you plan to achieve the necessary progress in the areas that you have identified
- an indication of how you might monitor and review your progress.

Example:

Your PDP may look something like this:

- Strengths – good time keeping and the ability to meet deadlines.
- Weaknesses – easily distracted and this means that tasks take much longer than planned.
- Tasks – to develop a realistic timeframe for both the preparation and completion of work.

If you look at the detail of the tasks, it may be that you start to think about:

- how you organize your study time,
- why the distractions have interfered with your planned work,
- where you study,
- how often you are interrupted.

If you have taken over the dining room table in your home as the resting place for your academic books, do not be surprised when your train of thought is broken several times each day by hungry looks from the people who share that home (Stogdon & Kiteley, 2010).

To sum up one of the key building blocks for the whole range of your skill development is how well you are able to reflect on your learning. Consequently, this can become a very important part of your development in your journey towards becoming a qualified worker.

WAYS OF REFLECTING

Generally reflection could be seen as a process of asking yourself questions (e.g. Why did I do that? What effect did I have?). This is similar to the process of being critical. There is, however, a difference. In higher education, ‘being critical’ is often related to situations and information outside yourself, whilst ‘reflection’ is often related to what you do. Evaluating what you’ve learnt, done or thought is part of reflection (Drew & Bingham, 2010).

Reflection is a crucial skill for any situation (e.g. higher education, at work, socially). All of you are already doing it: if you play football and think about the match afterwards, you’re reflecting on what you did and what you could have done; you may think about things you said to somebody; you may leave an exam thinking about the questions you did well (or not). We all do it.

So if we all do it, why do we need to learn how to do it? We may reflect on some things more than others. We may reflect unhelpfully (just going over what you did wrong isn’t much use if you don’t work out what to do instead). We may not do it in the form required when talking about some courses or PDP (Personal/ Professional Development Planning).

- Here are some possible ways of reflecting (Drew & Bingham, 2010):
- talk to somebody about it. Hearing yourself describe it can help you think it through. How the other person reacts might help too. Do their reactions annoy or please you? Why? Are they helpful? Why?
- Write about it. Put your writings aside for a day, then review it. What do you think now? This helps you see the situation as somebody else might.
- Keep a diary or journal, not only of what has happened but also of your feelings and reactions. You might see pattern or progress.
- Pretend you're somebody else talking to yourself. Sit opposite your jumper or jacket. Tell 'yourself' what happened or how you felt. This can be powerful (do it in private though!).
- Record it and play it back at a later stage, to see what you now think.
- Pay attention to your reactions. If somebody makes a suggestion and your reaction is uncomfortable, ask yourself why: it might be telling you what you really think. This can work well if you have a decision to make.
- Make diagrams or charts (e.g. to show connections).
- Draw your learning or your feelings or events and their impact.

REFLECTIVE WRITING: SOME INITIAL GUIDANCE

One of the very common ways of reflecting is reflective writing. You might be asked to do it whilst managing your PDP (CPD). That's why of high importance is to understand what is reflective writing.

We will start from what reflective writing is not. It is NOT:

- conveyance of information, instruction or argument in a report, essay or 'recipe';
- straightforward description, though there may be descriptive elements;
- a straightforward decision, e.g., about whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, etc.;
- simple problem solving like recalling how to get to the nearest station (Moon, 2004).

In the context of your higher education programme, reflective writing will usually have a purpose (e.g., you will be writing reflectively about something that you have to do or have done). It will usually involve the sorting out of bits of knowledge, ideas, feelings, awareness of how you are behaving and so on. It could be seen as a melting pot into which you put a number of thoughts, feelings, other forms of awareness, and perhaps new information. In the process of sorting it out in your head, and representing the sortings out on paper, you may either recognize that you have learnt something new or that you need to reflect more with, perhaps, further input. Your reflections need to come to some sort of end point, even if that is a statement of what you need to consider next.

It is also worth recognizing that reflective writing may be a means of becoming clearer about something. For example, you might use reflective writing to consider the kind of career direction that you might take. Into the ‘melting pot’ you might then ‘put’ ideas, information, feelings, other people’s perspectives and advice. A metaphor for reflection or its expression in reflective writing in this context is ‘cognitive housekeeping’ to imply its nature as a sorting out, clarifying process.

From what has been said above, it will be obvious that reflection is not a straightforward and ‘tidy’ process itself. When you have to represent the process for someone else to read, you will inevitably tidy it up - but if a tutor is expecting reflective writing, she will not be looking for a dry ‘single-track’ account, or just a conclusion. It is also all right to use the first person - ‘I’ - in reflective writing.

Reflective writing may apply to anything that is relatively complex. You might reflect on:

- how to go about your dissertation topic;
- how well you wrote an assignment;
- experiences gained in your part-time work;
- what your essay title means and how to go about writing it;
- how to present some project work;
- how you want to behave differently in some context;
- the way in which your non-work activities relate to the programme that you are on;
- the quality of a relationship with someone (to do with your programme or home or family, etc.);
- how well you got on in your programme last semester;
- your process in solving a difficult problem (e.g., in academic work);
- what you need to do to improve your study processes.

You will often find there to be unexpected rewards in working in this manner. You will find out things that you had not considered, you even find that your academic writing becomes more fluent; you may find that you can solve problems more easily when you have reflected on your processing of similar problems.

Questions to facilitate reflective writing (Moon, 2004):

- What is the nature of the significance of this issue to you?
- How do you feel about it?
- How do your feelings relate to any action?
- Was it good/bad - and what are the implications?
- What do you need to do?
- What other information do you need (ideas, knowledge, opinion, etc.)?
- Are there previous instances of this event, issue arising that will help you to think more or differently about it?

- Are there others, or the views of others, who are relevant to this matter - and in what way?
- Is there another point of view that you could explore - are there alternative interpretations to consider?
- Are others seeing this issue from different points of view that may be helpful to you to explore?
- If you 'step back' from this issue, how does it look different?
- How do you judge your ability to reflect on this matter?
- Do you notice that your feelings about it have changed over time - or in the course of writing this - suggesting that your own frame of reference has changed?
- Are there ethical/moral/political wider social issues that you would want
- to explore?

It is worth thinking about the quality of reflective writing as being on a continuum from rather superficial writings that are largely descriptive, to much deeper writings in which the questioning is more profound. Neither is necessarily right or wrong - they are just different. Reflective writing will need to be 'pitched' according to the purpose for which the task is done.

A comparison of reflective writing and report or essay writing (Moon, 2004):

Undergraduate report/essay writing	Reflective writing
The subject matter is likely to be clearly defined	The subject matter may be diffuse and ill-structured
The subject matter is not likely to be personal	The subject matter may be personal
The subject matter is likely to be given	The subject matter may be determined by the writer
The purpose of this kind of writing is set in advance, usually fairly precisely in a title/topic	There may be purpose, but it is more of the nature of a 'container' or direction, not a precise title that predicts the outcome
Most of the ideas drawn into an essay/a report will be predictable and will be determined by the subject matter	Ideas will be drawn into reflective writing from anywhere that the writer believes to be relevant. What is drawn in will be determined by the sense being forged by the writer
There will be a conclusion	There may be a conclusion in that something has been learnt, or there may be a recognition of further areas for reflection

Undergraduate report/essay writing	Reflective writing
Essays/reports are more likely to be ‘one off’ - finished and handed in	Reflective writing may be part of a process that takes place over a period of time
There is likely to be a clear structure of introduction, discussion and conclusion	There is not necessarily a clear structure other than some description at the beginning and some identification of progress made. Structures, such as questions to prompt reflective activity may be given
The writing style is likely to be relatively objective - probably without use of the first person	The writing style is likely to be relatively subjective, using the first person
An essay or report is usually intended to be a representation of learning	The intention underlying reflective writing is likely to be for the purpose of learning
An essay/a report is likely to be the product of a thinking process, tidily ordered	Reflective writing usually involves the process of thinking and learning, and it is therefore not necessarily ‘tidy’ in its ordering

USING EVIDENCE (INCLUDING FEEDBACK)

An important way of reflecting is to look at evidence. One important form of evidence of what you’ve learnt, done, said or thought is feedback (Drew & Bingham, 2010).

We get feedback all the time. Here are some examples:

- people’s facial expressions or body language in reaction to what you say or do;
- people’s casual comments about you (‘that’s a nice jacket’) or your views (‘why on earth do you think that film was good?’);
- people who seek (or avoid) your company;
- tutors’ or other students’ responses to your comments in class;
- things that work (or not) when you create or repair them.

Feedback is anything that gives you information about the effectiveness of what you did, said or thought. It is suggested that students only see feedback from tutors as ‘legitimate’ if it is written, but in reality we all receive in different forms all the time (Drew & Bingham, 2010).

One issue is what we do with feedback. Some may be hurtful or blatantly incorrect. Some of us ‘hear’ all the negative things rather than the positives.

When you get feedback, think about the following, to help make judgements about its value:

- who gave it? What do they know? (e.g. are they experts/ experienced? How important are they to you? Might they have a vested interest or some sort of bias?).
- When did they give it? Immediate feedback is good. After time, memory may be faulty.
- Does it make clear what was effective (or not) about what you did, said or thought?
- What’s the evidence for their views? Why do they think what they think?
- What’s the weight of evidence? If one person says X and others say Y, who’s right (of course, the person saying X may know more)? Are they generalising from one incident that’s uncharacteristic of you?

If you’d like feedback, who might offer a valid or relevant view (e.g. a member of a group you’ve worked in; an expert in the topic)? It’s a good idea to:

- ask for feedback as soon after the event as possible;
- ask specific questions (‘How well did X work? What effect did it have when I did Y?’);
- ask for clarification (e.g. if people look puzzled, ask them why). If they make judgemental statements (e.g. ‘That was good’) ask what they mean;
- check if they meant what you think they meant (‘Do you mean my writing was illegible?’);
- thank them.

Remember! Your aim is to get feedback, not justify yourself. It’s not a good idea to argue or defend: they’ll be wary of giving you feedback again and if you asked for feedback, it’s ungracious to then grumble about it. Just because you thank them, doesn’t mean you agree with them.

The reverse is the case for giving feedback. You may need to do this for course activities or at work (e.g. peer assessment, appraisals):

- give the feedback as soon after the event as possible.
- Give specific information (‘X worked well’). Don’t make judgemental statements that people can’t do anything about (e.g. ‘It was rubbish’). Help them see what to do in future.
- Give evidence for what you think.
- Avoid uncomfortable discussions by being assertive (‘That’s my feedback, do feel free to use it or not’, Drew & Bingham, 2010).

TIPS TO REMEMBER

The whole point of reflecting is to then plan to take action to build on strengths and improve or change where there are limitations.

NB! Don't blame yourself if things don't go quite to your plan; it's all right to take risks sometimes and make impromptu changes to your plan. You can then consider afterwards why you did this and whether it worked or not. You always need to take into account current circumstances: what might work in one situation may not work in another. Making changes comes with time, experience and knowledge.

Also try not to blame others for incidents that may happen within your plan maintenance. If you shift the blame onto others, you may feel there is no need to make any changes yourself. Don't necessarily blame yourself either, but do accept responsibility, learn from the incidents and try different methods to ensure they don't happen again.

You should also attend standardisation events which give you the opportunity to compare your performance with others. Even if you don't learn anything new, such events will confirm that you are doing things correctly.

Don't become complacent and dismiss the idea of further training as too time-consuming; be positive and treat it as a new challenge. To reach your goals, you need commitment, motivation enthusiasm and passion for what you try to improve.

Reflecting upon your own learning, taking account of feedback from colleagues, then evaluating your practice and maintaining your development, will enable you to become an effective learner that will lead you to a rewarding career for yourself.

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY

Recall from your experience some important situation where you had to perform a task or to perform your skills to others. Did it go well? Was there anything you would like to change? Here is the list of questions that may help you identify evidence for your judgements. Please fill in the table (see Resource 1, annexes to „Reflective Tinking and Writing”). You may use these questions every time you want to analyse an exact situation.

ACTIVITY

In the following, in each column, tick ways of learning you use in the situation given. While doing this, think about the advantages and disadvantages of the way of learning for that situation and you (see Resource2, annexes to „Reflective Tinking and Writing”).

FURTHER READING

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