

Time for reflective practice?
**A case study about the barriers and enablers to engaging
reflective practice**

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Abstract

This paper draws on key components of a recent dissertation about the barriers and enablers to engaging reflective practice as experienced by learners of a leadership development programme. Reflective practice is considered an important foundation for quality learning and recalibrating actions, enabling individuals creatively navigate uncertain situations through persistent pivotal questioning (Bolton, 2014), while facilitating timeout from busyness. A dearth of research, focusing on engagement with and impact of reflective practice in the Irish management education sector, was a catalyst for this research. The main finding was the need to address a chasm which was evident between the *learning* and consistent *doing* of reflective practice. A key barrier, reported by learners, to crossing this chasm was the lack of time while the converse, taking time, was identified as a key enabler. The main recommendation to crossing this chasm, to provide a foundation for reflective practice to flourish, is taking time to consistently commit to focusing on reflective activities. Adopting Covey's (1994, p.151) time management matrix is recommended as one way to facilitate this focus. The extent to which the reader explores the usefulness of this matrix to cross this chasm, will be one measure of the effectiveness of this discussion paper.

Keywords: reflective practice; enablers; barriers; leadership development; taking time.

1. Introduction and Motivation

This paper is a first step at disseminating findings from my recently completed dissertation, *a case study about the barriers and enablers to engaging reflective practice*, as part fulfilment of an MA in Higher Education. A snapshot of the process, content and limitations of this case study, it is intended as a catalyst to promote discussion and individual reflection by the reader.

As an advocate of reflective practice and a leadership development practitioner, my research question focused on exploring the barriers and enablers to engaging reflective practice, encountered by part-time postgraduate learners, typically working in middle to senior management positions in the workplace.

My motivation for pursuing this area of research was the acknowledgement that the uncertainty of economic and environmental changes in the twenty-first century are challenging the practices and effectiveness of managers and leaders (Palmisano, 2015). Different approaches may be needed to facilitate leaders — e.g. educators, learners, business professionals — to negotiate this uncertain, disruptive environment of the twenty-first century. Reflective practice is posited as one such approach.

Despite the growing popularity of reflective techniques, research suggests that many are struggling to find ways to effectively practice reflection impacted by a lack of time and tangible guidance. This suggests that a chasm exists between the theory of reflective practice and the extent of understanding and adoption.



Figure 1.1 Gap between the learning and doing of reflective practice

Located within this context, the research aimed to explore the extent to which this struggle was negotiated by part-time learners of a leadership development programme in their practical application of reflection. To inform the research question, *what are the barriers and enablers encountered by part-time post graduate learners, in*

management education, to adopting reflective practice?, three stakeholders (see Figure 1.2) facilitating this reflective practice were identified and used as lenses to anchor the case study.

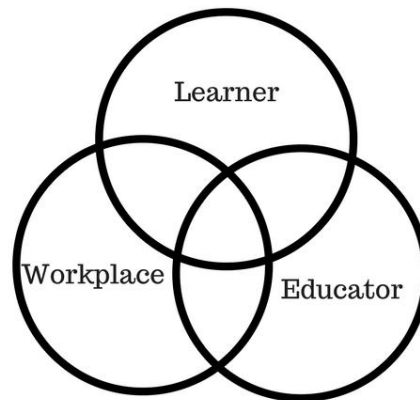


Figure 1.2 Stakeholders facilitating reflective practice

These lenses were the part-time postgraduate *learner*, the *educator* providing the teaching and learning, and the *workplace*, encouraging learners to undertake leadership development programmes. The findings and recommendations set out in this paper focus on the learner lens, while acknowledging the impact of the educator and the workplace in cultivating reflective practice.

2. Literature Review

Perspectives on reflective practice

Reflective practice, as a concept, was introduced into the educational lexicon in the last century by Donald Schön (1983, 1987), frequently referred to as the father of reflective practice. This developed from his challenging of the scientific method in professional education which he called technical rationality and the need to balance with some form of artistry. Problems in leadership and management are frequently viewed as being ambiguous, seldom clearly defined with predictable outcomes, requiring practitioners to make sense of uncertain situations which demands some form of creativity. This distinction between predictable and unpredictable situations was recognised by Schön (1983), thereby opening an opportunity for reflective

practice to negotiate this unpredictability. Being more an art than a science, Schön (1983) argues that practitioners must find their way through these uncertain situations which at the outset may make no sense. Attempting to see things from a variety of viewpoints, a form of artistry, is central to the reflective process endorsed by Brookfield's (1995) four lenses: self-reflection, looking through student eyes, listening to peers as critical friends and researching scholarly literature. Similarly Bolton (2014) recognises the importance of considering the perspectives of others within one's reflective practice.

Reflection and action

Combining this notion of stepping away and differing lenses, Raelin (2002) opines reflective practice provides an opportunity to ponder on the meaning of recent events within our immediate environment through two lenses: the impact on self and the impact on others. Stepping back requires an awareness and openness to change and transition, as the act of reflection is not solely about generating new views of the world or situation. Dewey (1991) advocates for a consequence following the act of reflection. The practice of striving to see things differently becomes a habit with consistent practice and heightened self-awareness.

Benefit of reflection

Busyness is evident in individual lives, while Bennis (1989) argues that the demands of organisations are greater in the twenty-first century than any generation in recent history. Thompson and Pascal (2012) warn for seeking clarity about what is being done and why, dovetailing with McNulty's (2016b) assertion that leaders need to slow down in order to be able to speed up in this cycle of busyness. Recent research on CEOs by Gregersen (2017) similarly focuses on the need to slow down and work on being quieter. A bias towards action, cultivating busyness, can be detrimental to organisational learning and improvement, as it impedes reflection. Gino and Staats (2015) argue that being in a constant state of alertness does not allow individuals the space to reflect on what worked well, what did not work so well and what was missing. The most effective practitioners are those who reflect on, in and through their practice, to get an insight into what may need to change (Wheeler, 2015).

3. Methodology

Case study was the chosen methodology for this research, facilitating thick descriptions and in-depth analysis (Cousin, 2005) of reflective practice, using a variety of data sources. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed through survey questionnaire and semi-structured face to face and phone interviews which provided the researcher with rich data (Creswell, 2009) and findings. The mixed methods approach used in this case study is captured in Figure 3.1.

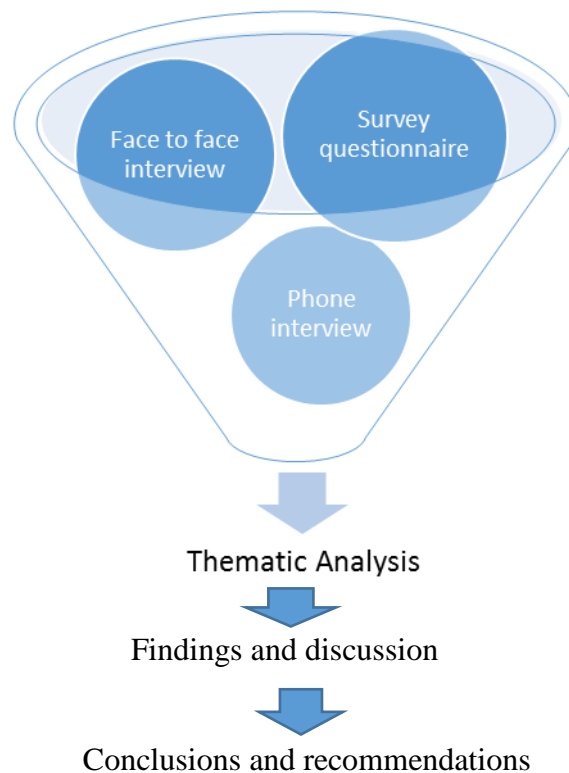


Figure 3.1 Mixed methods framework

The survey questionnaire achieved a 29% response rate (N=10) consisting of 3 female and 7 male respondents. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted, one face to face with the programme director and two individual phone interviews with survey respondents who volunteered to participate (see Table 3.1). Thematic analysis was conducted on the data identifying themes which informed the findings and discussion.

Gender	No. of Survey respondents	No of interview respondents
Female	3	0
Male	7	3

Table 3.1 Gender of respondents

The low level of respondents and the lack of gender balance in interviewees in the sample are key limitations of this research, impacting on the extent to which claims can be made from the voice of the respondents. However, the findings open up areas for consideration and discussion by the author, educator, learner and workplace.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings suggested three key barriers which inhibited the regular practice of reflection – lack of time, priority and commitment. The key enablers - taking time, prioritising reflective practice, committing to practicing reflection – reflected the individual responsibilities of the learner.

Barrier	Respondents	Enabler
Lack of time	“I believe proper reflective practice could be very useful in my current role but find that time pressure and work distractions limit my ability to engage fully in reflective practices”	Take time to reflect
Lack of priority	“I find the practice of reflection extremely useful but I don't prioritise and so I don't do it as often as I should and as I would like to”	Prioritise reflection
Lack of commitment	“Most of my "best" learnings have come from reflective practice. Unfortunately, even though I'm convinced of this fact, I still don't make the time available to practice”	Commit to learn and practice reflection

Table 4.1 Summary of barriers and enablers

The theme of time featured in a number of responses and was interpreted by this researcher as the foundation of the other barriers:

“time..more likely to do something like that when you're sitting down on the sofa..instead of a busy day where you get a knock on the door or the phone is going to ring..when you don't have the interruptions of normal life”

Lack of time and lack of prioritising the engagement with reflection were evident as obstacles, sometimes self-imposed: “I find the practice of reflection really useful but I don’t prioritise so I don’t do it as often as I should and as I would like to”. The importance of demonstrating commitment was echoed in respondent comments: “in an SME, the owner can be too busy to think strategically. Taking time to plan and think things out can be beneficial”. Respondents clearly recognised the power of reflective practice: “I believe proper reflective practice could be very useful in my current role but find that time pressure and work distractions limit my ability to engage fully with reflective practices”. Despite this awareness, respondents commented that sometimes “interruptions of daily life” and “work distractions” are allowed to get in the way.

Within the context of this case study, three stakeholders were identified – learner, educator and workplace. Findings suggested that each stakeholder played a role in influencing the extent to which reflective practice was cultivated by learners. The findings recognised the need and benefit of developing reflective skills in learners and educators. The willingness to engage in this learning was evident, however it was the chasm between learning and doing which presented the greatest challenge to the learner (see Figure 4.1). It was evident that respondents engaged in reflective practice during the leadership development programme, whereas on return to the workplace the lack of time became a consistent barrier to engaging in reflection. This is similar to other studies which frequently cite time as an obstacle to effectively engaging in reflection.

Reflecting on the barriers and enablers revealed some critical success factors (Table 4.2) for each of these stakeholders, to facilitate crossing the chasm (Figure 1.1) and engaging in reflective practice.

Stakeholder	Critical Success Factors
Learner	Taking responsibility and openness to change
Educator	Scaffolding the learning
Workplace	Promoting feedback culture

Table 4.2 Stakeholders actions to enable reflective practice

Drawing these findings together suggested the chasm between learning and doing can be crossed by the learner recognising the tipping point (Figure 4.1) and acting on these enablers and barriers.

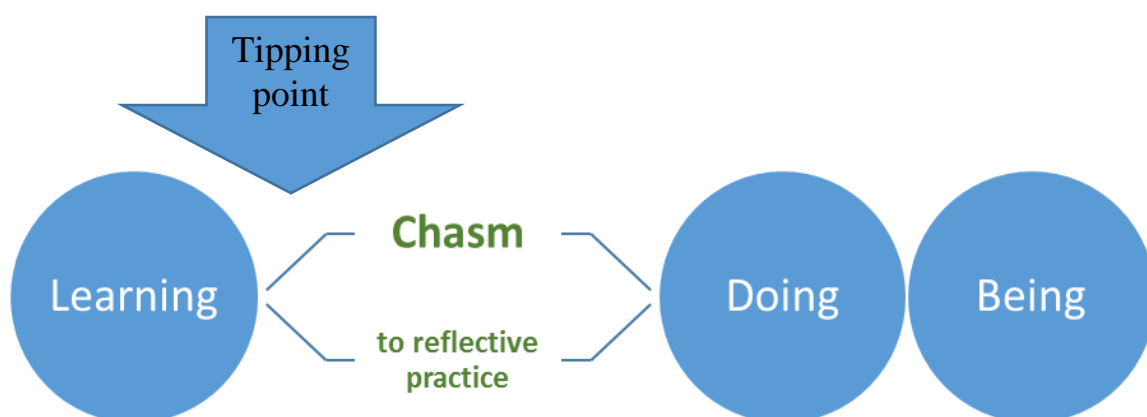


Figure 4.1 Tipping point between learning and doing reflective practice

5. Conclusions & Future Work

Conclusions

As a result of these findings it can be concluded that conscious commitment to taking

time to stop and pause are essential first steps, for the learner, to cross the chasm between the learning and doing of reflective practice. The educator, charged with scaffolding the learning, must consistently embed why, what and how of reflective practice within the programme learning context. The workplace, in the guise of management, have responsibility for promoting a culture of reflection to encourage, legitimise and be role models of reflective practice.

The key call to action is for learners to take time to consistently commit to engaging reflective practice. Adopting Covey's (1994, p.151) time management matrix (see Appendix A) within daily practice, is one way to enable this engagement. Distinguishing between urgent and important daily activities, understanding our priorities and time killers and choosing to focus on what is most effective, within a given context, would enable the learner take control over the timing and content of what they do (Oncken et al., 1999, p. 185).

Future Work

As a result of reflecting on the findings and conclusions, two points of further study are proposed. Firstly, conducting research in the learner's workplace to explore the impact of workplace management on the level of engagement in reflective practice. The intention is to get an insight into management's understanding of reflective practice, whether they are champions or critics, the extent to which it benefits their workplace, and their perspectives on enablers and barriers to sustaining reflective practice. Secondly, replicating this research across a larger cohort of learners, and introducing focus groups, to obtain more substantive data from which claims can be generated.

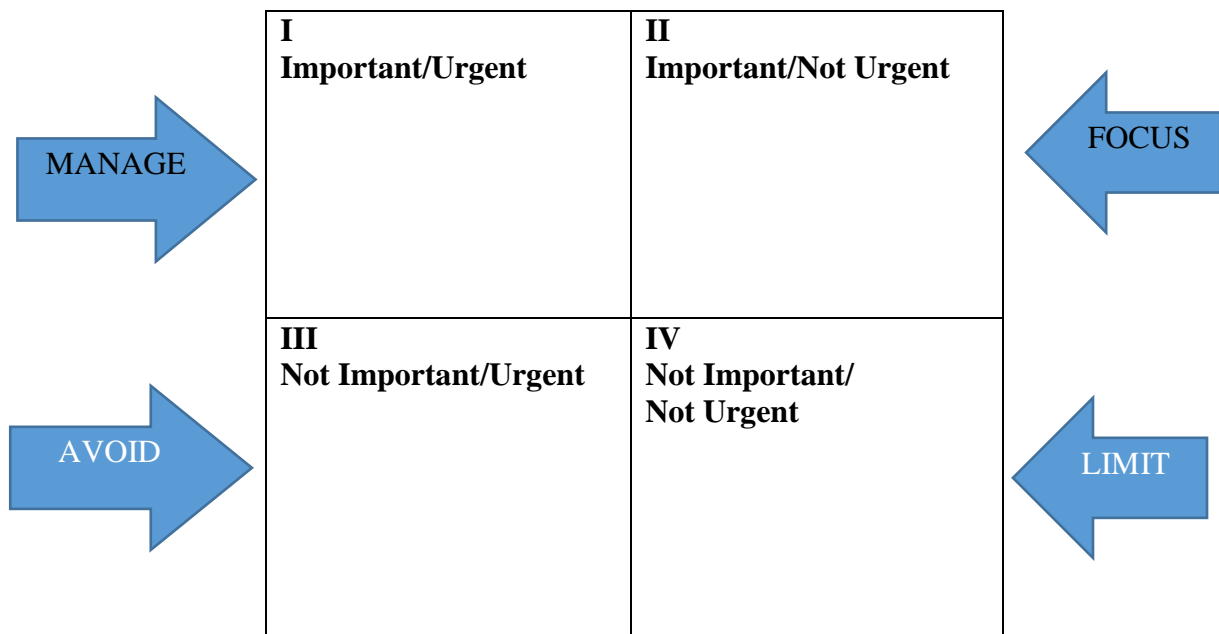
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Appendix A. Time Management Matrix (Covey, 1994)



Adapted from Covey (1994, p. 151)