

# Chapter 8

## The art of reflection

### Learning outcomes

This chapter offers opportunities to:

- understand what is meant by 'reflection'
- understand the importance of reflection to evaluating and improving personal performance
- identify different kinds of reflection for different purposes
- develop methods for improving your reflective skills
- devise your own model for reflection
- consider how to communicate the results of your reflection to other people.

### Introduction

If you have a fleck of bright green paint between your eyes, or egg on your chin, you cannot see them as they are too close to your eyes to be visible to them. Without a mirror or a comment from other people, you could pretend there was nothing to see. This won't, of course, prevent others from seeing what you cannot.

Similarly, we are usually too close to ourselves to be aware of the things we most need to know. We can easily fail to recognise what may be very evident to other people. Fortunately, we can stand back occasionally and reflect about such things as our aims, responses, feelings and performance. Well-developed skills in reflection can help us to:

- gain a more in-depth and honest picture of ourselves
- become more aware of our hidden motivations, our thinking styles, and of how we appear to other people
- develop a better understanding of what affects our own performance and progress
- develop our insight and judgements
- gain more control over our own thoughts, emotions, responses and behaviour so that we are in a better position to achieve what we want to achieve.

### Reflection in everyday life

Reflection is a natural activity. To a greater or lesser extent, we all spend time going back over what we have said or done, or what we wish we had said and done. Often, reflection accompanies hindsight: we realise long after an event how things might have been different, or how some small event was more significant than we realised.

This is reflected in everyday expressions:

- 'If only I had known then what I know now ...'
- 'With hindsight, I realise ...'
- 'I could never have imagined that doing X would result in Y ...'
- 'Now I realise where this leads, I wouldn't do it again ...'
- 'If I had the chance, I would do it all over again.'
- 'It was worth it/it wasn't worth it/it was worth the risk.'
- 'I wish I had ...'

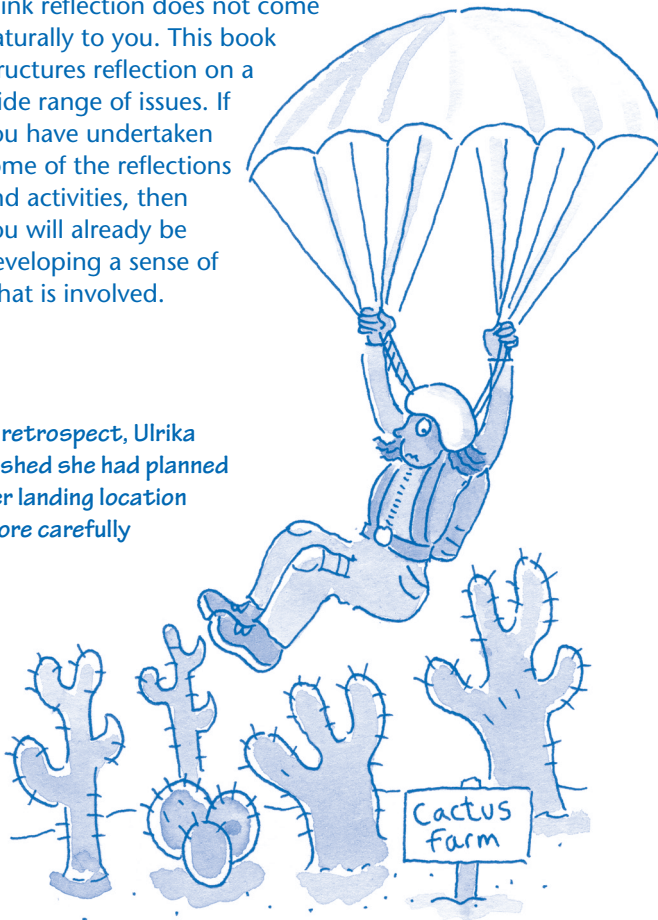
In other words, we review what was said or done, weighing up the consequences and considering what the alternatives might have been. We evaluate whether we would do things differently if given the chance again or whether we were right first time.

## Reflection as challenge

The reflective process is challenging. We do not always like to discover the truth about ourselves: it can be embarrassing to find we have walked around for several hours with a dab of egg yolk on our chin. We would rather believe it wasn't there or that nobody could see it. The same is true of the reflective process. When it works well, we discover things that make us feel uncomfortable. Our natural reaction is to pretend they do not really matter, or to look for an excuse, or to blame someone else. The things we most need to know can be the hardest to hear.

It takes time and practice for people to develop good reflective skills. Don't be discouraged if you think reflection does not come naturally to you. This book structures reflection on a wide range of issues. If you have undertaken some of the reflections and activities, then you will already be developing a sense of what is involved.

*In retrospect, Ulrika wished she had planned her landing location more carefully*



## Is reflection important?

At university level, you need to take responsibility for your own progress. Students are expected to develop into independent thinkers, capable of evaluating their own performance, drawing conclusions about what they did well and how to improve. Your success will depend, to a large extent, on yourself.

You need to be confident in your own judgements of your work. The feedback you receive from tutors and other students gives you a rare opportunity to compare your own evaluations with those of other people.

Your evaluations should be based upon sound criteria rather than a general feeling that you are right and others wrong. Consider the differences between your own evaluations and the feedback you receive from others: these may hold important clues about how to achieve better grades and to improve your performance generally.

## Reflection and Personal Development Planning

All British universities are required to provide personal development planning (PDP) for students as a 'structured process of reflection'. By the time you leave university, you are expected to know how to use structured reflection to understand:

- yourself, your motivations, choices and behaviours
- what you want to achieve
- how to plan, follow through, review and evaluate a course of action
- how your responses and performance affect other people
- how to take action to improve your work or learning to the benefit of yourself and/or others.

## The 'reflective practitioner'

Many occupations now require a 'reflective practitioner' approach. This is built into the work cycle in some way, such as through staff reviews or appraisal. Typically, this means taking personal responsibility for:

- your continuing professional development (CPD)
- evaluating your personal experience, strengths, qualities and skills
- identifying ways of using your strengths well, within your professional area
- identifying personal limitations and areas that could be improved through training, practice or informal learning
- recognising the effects of your own responses and behaviour and taking responsibility for these
- making useful contributions to team discussions
- improving individual and team performance
- identifying your own contribution to the results of a task, project or outcome.

Your current programme may include reflective activity.

If not, the self-evaluation questionnaire on p. 221 can help you to decide where you need to work next.

## What is 'reflection'?

Reflection is a type of thinking. It is associated with deep thought aimed at better understanding. It includes a mixture of elements, such as:

### 1 Making sense of experience

It is important to note the difference between 'experience' and 'learning'. Experience can be the basis for learning and development. However, just because we have been through an experience it does not mean we have learnt all there is to learn about it – or even that we have learnt anything at all. Reflection is an important part of the learning experience. It is where we analyse experience, actively attempting to 'make sense' or find the meaning in it.

### 2 'Standing back'

By 'standing back', we gain a better view or perspective of an experience, issue or action. It is not always easy to reflect when caught up in the midst of activity.

### 3 Repetition

Reflection involves 'going over' something, perhaps even several times, in order to look at it critically from several points of view or to check nothing has been missed.

### 4 Deeper honesty

Reflection is associated with a striving after the truth. It is through reflection that we can come to acknowledge things we find difficult to admit in the normal course of events.

### 5 'Weighing up'

Reflection involves a sense of even-handed judgement and critical evaluation – it usually involves 'weighing things in the balance', taking all things into account rather than just the most obvious.

### 6 Clarity

Reflection can bring greater clarity, as though seeing things reflected back in a mirror. This can be useful at any stage in the process of devising, carrying out or reviewing activities.

### 7 Understanding

Reflection is associated with opening up to learning and understanding at a deeper level, including gaining insight into theories and concepts that are difficult to access by other means.

### 8 Making judgements

Reflection involves an element of making judgements and drawing conclusions.



Circle as many of the following as are relevant and of benefit to you. Use the empty circles to add in any others of importance to you.

To consider how I could get better marks

To think about how what I am learning all fits together

To see how I could do things differently at work

To manage my emotions better

To put time aside to consider my life plans

To check I am on track with what I need to do to get a job

To check I am on track with what I need to do to gain promotion

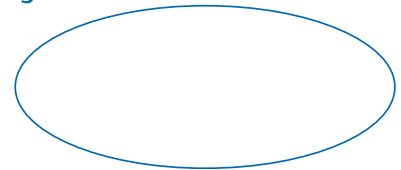
To make sense of what I am learning

To check that I am taking things in on my course

To apply theories to my work

To be more efficient

To be more mindful of how I do things



To make me slow down and think

To become more self-aware

To see how I change over time

To be more professional in my approach

To think about how my actions affect others

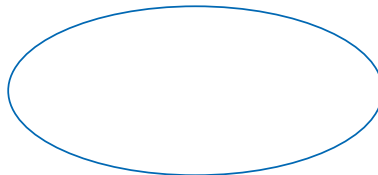
To take on board feedback from other people

I need to do it for my course

I need to do it in my job

To gain a broader perspective

For staff appraisal



For better self-understanding

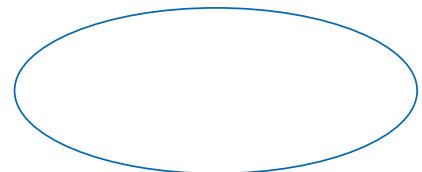
To consider what training I need

To avoid getting into a rut

To find out where I could introduce more variety to the way I do things

For space to think about what matters to me

To take on board new ideas



Highlight the one that is the most significant for you.

# Self-evaluation on reflective practice

For each of the following statements, rate your responses as outlined below. Note that the rating for 'strongly disagree' carries no score.

**Rating:** 4 = strongly agree 3 = agree 2 = sort of agree 1 = disagree 0 = strongly disagree

'I am very confident that I ...'	Rating
1 know how to use logs or reflective journals	
2 understand myself very well	
3 challenge my own thinking sufficiently	
4 spend sufficient time looking for relevant links between different things	
5 spend sufficient time 'making sense' of what I learn and experience	
6 spend sufficient time thinking about the significance of what I learn	
7 spend sufficient time thinking about how to improve my academic performance	
8 spend enough time thinking about the effects of my actions and behaviour	
9 make an accurate evaluation of my own strengths	
10 know how to apply my experience and skills to novel situations	
11 am aware of my personal limitations	
12 am aware of my own personal development needs	
13 always consider all options before arriving at a decision	
14 am always aware of all the motivations underlying my behaviour	
15 always take full responsibility for my own part in events	
16 spend enough time thinking about how to improve my skills in dealing with other people	
17 spend enough time thinking about how I could make a better contribution to groups I am in	
18 spend sufficient time thinking about the significance of other people's actions	
19 spend sufficient time thinking about the significance of what other people say	
20 can reflect accurately about my emotional responses to events	
21 could draw upon my reflections well for assessment purposes	
22 spend sufficient time thinking about how to use the feedback I receive from others	
23 know how to use reflection effectively when applying for jobs	
24 am clear about the different kinds of reflection that are open to me	
25 do not need to develop my skills of reflection any further.	
<b>Add up your score</b>	<b>Total</b>

## Interpreting your score

You have a score out of 100. This is a rough guide to your strengths as a 'reflective practitioner'. If the score is less than 100, then there is more work that you could do to develop your reflective skills.

- What are your priorities for improving reflection?
- Which *one* thing could you do this week in order to develop your reflective abilities?

## Basic steps for reflection

If you are new to reflection, the following steps outline some basic features of reflection to help you get started.

- *Small regular bites* Keep a regular journal, log or blog. Write something in this at regular intervals. Little and often is better at first, so that you develop the habit of reflection. Seven minutes every weekday evening is all that is needed. Alternatively, you may prefer to take half an hour once or twice a week.
- *Be specific* Choose a particular incident or a feature of your day or week to focus on for each entry. This will develop your critical thinking better than writing on a superficial basis about your whole day.
- *Aim at improvement* Choose something that was difficult or 'sticky' during your day. Think through what gave rise to the problem. Consider how you might achieve a better outcome next time. Alternatively, spot the things that went unexpectedly well, and consider why that might have been the case.
- *Focus on yourself* Avoid using reflection as a way of blaming and taking out anger on others, even if you feel they deserve it. Focus on your own role, and how you can make a similar situation more manageable next time. This helps to take you forward.
- *Use prompts* Select an activity from the book and use this to structure your reflection. See pages 235–8 on the 'Core Model for Reflection', for ideas for prompt questions.
- *Critical rather than descriptive writing* Reflection involves critical, analytical thinking. Weigh up the strengths and weaknesses, costs and benefits, decisions and outcomes. These are thinking skills required for most academic work. Avoid descriptive writing that simply recites what happened, or who said what, unless there are particular reasons for doing this as part of your course. For more about critical thinking, see Cottrell (2011).
- *Have a purpose* Reflection should be directed to a purpose. It is better to write a short entry that is meaningful than a long one which is simply pages of description. Find a topic that is useful to you. What do you most need to improve? What do you need to think through?
- *Find the right questions* Consider the right questions for structuring your reflection. It is easier, when you start out, to answer questions that give shape to your thinking. See p. 223.
- *Review* After a few weeks, read back over your entries. Look for the main themes in what you have written and consider the significance of these for you. Decide what action to take next.

### Example

#### Brief critical entry aimed at improving performance

How good were my people skills today?

*Today was useful as I realised I am still interrupting people when they are talking. I cut right across Mary today during the seminar break. I realise this was not very skilful or considerate. Mary looked annoyed. I just ignored this at the time because I was embarrassed. It would have been better to have apologised as soon as I realised. I will next session. I have to take more care not to burst in when other people are talking. Maybe I could ask Joe and Ali to point it out to me for a while so I notice it more.*

#### Descriptive entry

The following is an example of poor reflection. It simply describes what happens and focuses on other people. The writer doesn't take personal responsibility for actions or plan to improve performance. It doesn't take the writer forward.

*In the seminar break today, Mary was talking and I wanted to say something. She had been talking for a few minutes already and I hadn't said anything. I was interested in what she was saying but then just interrupted. It was a simple mistake. I didn't mean to upset her. Mary carried on talking for a moment and then decided to stop. She looked angry. Everybody just looked at me as if I was in the wrong. I didn't even talk for very long. Peter said I had an interesting point. Then we went back in the seminar and Mary avoided looking at me all the way through.*

## Approaches to structured reflection

There are many ways of approaching reflection and you are unlikely to need them all. Browse through the chapter and see which activities most appeal or are most useful to you at present. The types of reflection introduced below are:

- question-based reflection
- open reflection
- synthetic reflection
- developmental reflection
- evaluative reflection.

As you will see, there are overlaps and connections between these different types of reflection. Each type may be useful for a different task or for different stages of a task. As you develop your reflective ability, you will find that you begin to move quite easily between these different methods to suit the task in hand. Your tutors may also be able to guide you about the types of reflective activity that are most suitable for your subject.

### Question-based reflection

Question-based reflection is a highly structured form of reflection; it is used extensively throughout this book. The method is relatively simple. Generally, a series of questions is given under a set of headings. Question-based reflection has a number of advantages:

- it prompts and guides you through the reflective process
- it helps ensure you don't miss out any essential elements
- it can give shape and direction to the subject of reflection, reducing vague discussion and 'waffle'
- it enables everyone in a group to reflect on the same set of issues in a particular way in order to make direct comparisons on specific issues
- questions increase motivation to produce a response and can sharpen thinking.

### Who does it suit?

Question-based reflection is associated with analytical, serial thinking. It tends to suit people who like or need to work in a logical, ordered or controlled way, and who appreciate some external direction.

*But why did I ... ?*

**Could I have ... ?**

**At what point did ... ?**

*What was the best ... ?*

**Did I ... ?**

**Which ... ?**

### Example

#### Question-based reflection

##### Question

*How did I make use of feedback for my course-work?*

##### Response

*I read through it, I accepted most of it, I identified themes that need to be addressed.*

##### Question

*Did I make the best use of the feedback I received on my report?*

##### Response

*At the time I thought I had made good use of the feedback. I did read it and I set myself priorities for action. However, looking back, I don't think I took it seriously enough. I wondered if the tutor had been too harsh on me, so when I did my essay for the next tutor, I didn't really follow through on the advice I had been given. I then got some of the same feedback again. I realise I ignored my own priorities.*

##### Question

*How can I make more effective use of feedback?*

##### Response

*I need to set myself a realistic target. I tried to take on too many changes at once last time and then got discouraged. I need to speak to my tutor to work out one or two changes that would make the most impact. Basically, I need to be more focused and accept that I cannot change everything at once.*

Select an activity that you engage in regularly or you wish to improve.



In your reflective journal, jot down a list of at least ten questions to structure your reflection about your performance.

- Answer your questions.
- What did you find out about your performance by questioning it in this way?

## Open reflection

Open reflection methods encourage you to 'let go' of some concentration, and 'go with the flow' rather than trying to control the process too tightly. Open reflection can seem 'unstructured'. However, there is usually a structure of some kind to the method, such as working from prompts, working through several stages in a process or following semi-formal rules.

The benefits of open reflection are:

- it makes it easier to get started on a task as it helps you to generate thoughts and ideas
- it allows the imagination free rein so that a relatively uncensored set of associations can be formed
- unexpected ideas may emerge, which can be energising and exciting
- it can be more personally relevant than working through questions set by somebody else.

Open reflection is good for generating ideas, but not always for structuring and making sense of them. It can help to combine open reflection with other methods to structure your thoughts effectively and make meaning from experience.

This method of reflection suits people who like to work in organic ways, and who appreciate things evolving in new or original ways. Open reflection can be conducted in an orchestrated way (a tutor guides the process) or can be personally controlled.

The various methods of open reflection are discussed below.

## Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a very simple and quick technique. Take a large piece of paper and a pen. Write the problem or question down somewhere on the paper – the centre is often a useful place but you can choose wherever suits you. Write down every idea or solution that comes into your head. At this stage, do not evaluate or judge what emerges – just let the ideas flow.

Brainstorming is one of the most widely used techniques for generating ideas quickly. You can use it to start the process of reflection, as well as for writing essays or other assignments.





## Activity Brainstorming

- Select a topic that you need to think about this week – or brainstorm ideas about an ideal birthday gift for someone you know.
- Write the topic somewhere on the paper.
- Give yourself five minutes to jot down as many ideas as you can.
- Avoid judging your ideas as you go along; just write down whatever comes into your mind.
- Once you have finished the brainstorm, consider each suggestion in turn. Cross out the least useful. If other ideas emerge as you do this, jot them down for consideration too.

### Discussion

Discussion can be a very valuable form of reflection. It has the advantage of offering multiple perspectives. Paired or group discussions may raise challenging questions that you, as an individual, may wish to avoid. Such questions are often the ones we need most to address – so discussion-based reflection can keep you on your toes.

Discussion, unless strongly steered, can tend to drift in many directions. It is more creative if only a limited number of prompt questions or statements are used. This allows the discussion to wander broadly over the topic. For a more controlled discussion, set more questions and time limits for responses. If the discussion veers away from the agenda, don't dismiss the tangents straight away. The tangents may be giving you important clues about the target subject, or about how well the group is working together, or how you might approach a particular problem.

### Day-dreaming

Without forcing the issue, let your mind drift over the target subject. Day-dreaming about the target subject is more likely to occur if we give the subject serious and detailed consideration, and then do something very different for a while. Day-dreaming is not something that can be forced, but it can be encouraged and nurtured. Keep pen and paper, a digital recorder or a lap-top computer nearby to capture ideas as they occur. Reflections that arise in this way are easy to forget. Sometimes, there

is a natural movement from this more relaxed reflection towards more analytical questioning, as you become aware of what you are discovering.

### Networks

These are useful for letting your mind develop an idea in a visual way that follows the way the brain works. See page 211 for details.

### Free-writing

Writing as a reflective tool is different from writing intended for an audience or tutors. Its aim is to stimulate thinking, not to communicate a message to others. This means that the writing may look, sound and flow differently from other writing that you do. Your method will be quite different from any other person's. You may just pick up the pen and write; you may write words and phrases rather than sentences; you may scribble and draw as you write; you may write in verse. In other words, you assess the value of this writing for yourself, in terms of whether it helps you to reflect and achieve your own aims.

## Activity Free-writing

Choose a subject that you want to think about this week. This may be the same as one you considered for a previous activity.

- Give yourself ten minutes to write down, as fast as you can, any thoughts that come into your mind on this subject.
- Unlike brainstorms, where you just jot down any phrase, for free-writing aim to link the thoughts to some extent. Consider how one idea connects to others. Monitor, lightly, where your thoughts are going. As in the example above, this does not have to be a very developed process.
- When you have finished, read through what you have written. Look for *one* key theme or idea. Highlight or underline this.
- Give yourself a few minutes to free-write on only that *one* theme.
- Then highlight a *second* theme and free-write on that.
- You will find that your ideas on the subject are starting to develop.

Reflective free-writing, like other free-writing, will probably take more than one draft:

- a draft that generates ideas
- a draft that explores some issues in more detail, going off at tangents and with more details
- later drafts with more structure, as you begin to draw conclusions from your reflection and write them for others to read.

## Example

### Reflective free-writing

*A good day. Enjoyed the session. Made contributions. Really liked it when we saw video and discussed the video. I got very involved in the debate, which surprised me. I hadn't thought I felt so strongly. Not sure why I do. Why do I? I don't like the design of the bridge. Ugly. Not that though. More ... Reminds me of history lessons more than engineering. Hated history at school. Maybe not a good reason for me to respond to a design now. Or maybe it is. Maybe other people will feel the same way. What else influences my responses apart from history lessons? I like sculptured surfaces ...*

The above example may not make much sense to you, but it did to the person who wrote it. He knew the issue he was trying to explore and this was just his first step. Try for yourself the free-writing activity on page 225.

### Drawing and doodling

Drawing and doodling can be used to distract you from controlling your thought processes too closely, allowing your mind to take you where it wishes. You may find that the drawing and the reflection have little in common. On the other hand, you may wish to analyse your drawings for clues about how your mind is working. You could need to check whether your interpretation made sense when weighed against other evidence.



Caricatures, cartoons, paintings or other graphic means may be your preferred methods for reflection, for exploring past actions or events and for getting a feel for their meaning.

## Activity Doodle

- Select a new topic for reflection.
- Take a piece of paper and scribble in the middle.
- Either doodle as you think about the subject or draw a picture or diagram of it. The image does not have to be of good quality: it is simply a tool to distract you from concentrating too hard on the topic.
- If ideas emerge that you want to jot down or develop, then let yourself do so.
- After you have finished, consider how far you find this method suits your learning style.

### Generative thinking

The strategies suggested above are associated with generative thinking styles. The strategies and approaches developed in Chapter 7, 'Thinking outside the box', can support the development of this way of working.

### Synthetic reflection

Synthetic reflection involves a 'bringing together' or a 'synthesising' of different aspects and perspectives. It is useful for giving shape to a series of reflections or making sense of earlier stages of reflection. It helps you find the meaning behind your reflections, thoughts and actions. It also stimulates creative thinking.

### Advantages of synthetic reflection

Synthetic reflection is useful for:

- seeing links and connections
- gaining a sense of the 'bigger picture'
- gaining a concrete overview from where to begin more detailed analysis
- giving shape or structure to the reflective process
- drawing reflections together into a coherent whole.

Synthetic reflection is associated with *gestalt*, holistic, or 'right-brain' thinking. It suits people who like to spot clues, solve puzzles or put things together into new forms. Artistic endeavour and synthetic processes are closely associated. Linking can be made in logical or creative ways, so synthetic reflection can suit those who like order and those who like to work organically. The importance of developing these modes of thinking is highlighted in Chapter 7, 'Thinking outside the box'.

As synthetic reflection helps to draw things together, it can be used to follow up reflection based on free writing or discussion.

### **Look for links and themes**

Synthetic reflection is an active type of reflection. You are looking for links, connections and leads in material you have already produced. Use it to search out hidden themes that are there on the page but which you may not yet have noticed. Going over the material, re-writing it, colouring it, highlighting it, organising it, illustrating it, will help you to focus on each theme.

#### **Activity**



#### **Synthesis**

- Select one theme that you began to explore in a previous activity.
- Identify themes and links in your earlier reflections.
- Organise your thoughts so that the themes and links stand out clearly.

## **Developmental reflection**

Whilst any method of reflection can assist the process of personal development, the following methods focus specifically on understanding and improving your performance and achievement.

#### **Activity**



#### **Developmental reflection**

- If you have not done so already, complete the activities on p. 221 to identify your developmental priorities.



In your reflective journal, note down your thoughts about one of your priorities.

For example, you may find it useful to consider some of the following questions:

- What made you select this as a priority? What is really the key issue for you?
- What is the goal? What do you hope to gain by developing this area?
- How does this contribute to achieving your long-term or short-term goals?
- What is the problem?
- What have you tried already? How successful was this?
- What will you do next?
- What would be a realistic time-scale to address this successfully?
- Who else would benefit if you addressed this priority?
- What might you do to sabotage your success in achieving this?
- What are your feelings about this priority? What emotions, if any, does it bring up for you?

### **Monitoring performance**

You may be asked to keep a log, blog or journal as part of your course. Even if this is not a requirement, it is a useful practice. Many employers require logs to be kept of actions taken, along with the rationale and outcomes. These may be used in team meetings or staff reviews.

## Example

### Monitoring performance

Project Group: reflection

20th February

*I chaired the project group meeting again today. This went better than last time. I was able to keep the group to the agenda. Unlike last time, this time I did not let people just bring up new topics as they felt like it. I was quite tough, for me. I summarised points well and the feedback on this was good.*

*Unfortunately, the meeting still ran over time. I did find it difficult to break in to interrupt the flow when Carla and Ian started arguing. I am not sure whether I should speak to them before the meeting, or whether I should just cut across them, which might seem rude. I am worried because they speak loudly and it would look bad if nobody could hear me when I try to interrupt. Because I didn't keep these two in check, we ran over time. Time-keeping looks like my big challenge, but really the issue is about knowing how to interrupt people. This is my next priority. I have arranged to speak about this to my tutor.*

### Transferable skills

Chapter 2 demonstrated that expertise can be used in diverse contexts. However, skills do not transfer automatically. Skills are likely to be 'transferable' only if we:

- identify the range of skills involved in an activity. It is easy to overlook the wide range of sub-skills that are integrated even into everyday experience
- make specific attempts to draw parallels between one activity and another, searching out the comparisons
- are able to see how one situation is similar to the other. If we cannot see those parallels, then we may believe ourselves incapable of dealing with situations that are well within our actual competence. (Butterworth, 1992)

## Example

### Transferring skills 1: communication

*I have been working with children in a local school, helping them with their mathematics. The main developmental points for me were in taking responsibility for others and in using 'plain English'. However, I am also much better now at organising information so other people can use it.*

*The teacher pointed out that when I first started at the school, I launched straight in and tried to finish as much of the worksheet as I could. Now, I structure the work much better, so the children know what they are learning. This is partly good communication. However, I am also developing skills in structuring information. I look much more closely at how to break down instructions into small chunks that the children can take in at once. They don't like it if I have to repeat instructions.*

*I have found that this is useful when talking to adults too. In my part time job, I now do this when giving guidance on technical problems. I find I don't have to go over information so many times. This way of thinking seems to be helping me to plan and structure my written assignments. My tutor says I write more clearly.*

It is worth giving time and thought to what we have achieved in any one situation and considering its applicability to other situations. The self-knowledge gained may help us later in new situations.

## Example

### Transferring skills 2: academic skills

*I was very anxious about writing an essay as I hadn't written one before. My programme mainly uses report writing. Reports are very structured whereas I couldn't see how essays fitted together.*

*I spoke to a third-year student who talked me through the process. He pointed out that the discussion part of my reports is quite like an essay. If I take out the different sections of the report, such as the method and results sections, and remove all headings and tables, I have the core of an essay already.*

*I find it easier to write the main part of an essay as if I was writing a report. I use headings and write a paragraph under each of these. This helps me see the structure of my writing. I have noticed I need to check my paragraphs are linked because sections of essays flow into each other more than sections of reports. I then remove the headings when I am ready to hand in the essay.*



## Reflection: Spotting your skills

In your reflective journal, write for a few minutes about any one *new* activity that you have undertaken recently. Consider things such as:

- What skills did you already have that you used for the new activity?
- Were there any ways you adapted your usual ways of thinking or doing to help you with the new task?
- Did you discover anything about yourself by doing something new?

### Reflecting on your academic development

Take time to stand back and look at the big picture regarding your academic development. Consider:

- Are you sufficiently motivated to achieve well academically? How could you increase your motivation?
- How coherent are the choices you are making for options or electives? How will these choices help you achieve your longer-term ambitions?
- Are your choices giving you a strong enough specialist base?
- Will your choices make you stand out as distinctive with interests and capabilities beyond your subject specialism?
- What are the most stimulating aspects of your current learning?
- What is blocking your progress in any area? Are your study strategies still relevant or do they need to be revised?

### Example

#### Academic choices

*I wanted to study nothing but chemistry as that interested me most but I am concerned that this will look boring when I go for jobs. I am also interested in travelling abroad. I couldn't see how the two could fit together as I imagined myself in a large British factory near where I grew up.*

*The Careers Service showed me some case studies of career paths that people from my programme had taken, and I was struck by the opportunities that are available through some big companies for working in international branches. I am not sure yet whether to take a language, which I could start from scratch. This would make it easier to get picked for a placement abroad in the future. However, a specialist IT option might be more useful.*

*I also need to look at the opportunities open to me if I take a subsidiary in a subject such as health science or nutrition. I have put some time aside next Thursday to look through materials in the Careers Service library.*

You could reflect on differences in your performance from one topic or option to another. For example, you may experience a sudden drop or increase in your marks, or find you are more successful in some areas than others. You can begin to investigate this by techniques such as:

- listing how you approach each subject differently
- free writing about your attitudes or approaches to each subject
- brainstorming differences between the topics and how you will manage these.

### Example

#### Reflection on assignments

*I spent a long time on my last assignment and was disappointed with the marks. This time I spent less time and yet my mark was better. It seems to me the main difference is that I really thought a lot about what the question meant this time. All of my work was very focused on addressing the title. It felt like I really knew what I was doing – so it took less time. I spent more time, though, just working out my initial plans. I think I have made a breakthrough in the way I go about my assignments.*

*What I need now is to know how to work out what is needed for my land-surveying option. I can't really see how to work out the problems in the same way. I suppose I haven't actually tried applying my 'breakthrough' method to surveying yet, so I don't know if it will work or not.*

## Reflecting on your professional development

Take time occasionally to consider your short- and long-term professional development.

- What skills are you developing? Are there obvious gaps in your profile of skills and experience? Will these matter when you apply for jobs?
- Are your programme choices right for the type of career you have in mind?
- Are you focusing too much on study at the expense of other experience which would help your career?
- Are you making the best use of all that university has to offer to develop your skills, experience and CV?
- Is there some kind of work experience you could undertake to develop your people skills in the workplace?
- Are you making good (and early) use of the Careers Service and its resources?
- Would it be useful to have a mentor from the area you are considering for a career?

### Example

#### Professional development

*I have noticed that many job adverts require good team-building skills. There is not much opportunity on this programme to work in teams. I am worried that this will be a weak point when I come to apply for jobs. I have heard that there are volunteer activities being co-ordinated on campus and I will follow this up this week. Some of that might involve team work.*

*Another alternative might be to study an elective that includes team work in its skills profile. Unfortunately, I haven't found one that interests me. I might have to choose one that is not especially interesting. I would rather work in a team that was involved in real-life activities rather than study, as I think employers would prefer that ...*

## Reflecting on your personal development

Reflection isn't useful only for academic or work-related contexts. You can use it to look hard at any area of your personal development. For example:

- Are your life ambitions changing in any way?
- Are your values and beliefs undergoing any changes? What is influencing such change?
- Are you giving sufficient time to friends and family?
- How are you taking care of your health?
- What are you doing to manage stress?
- What are you doing to ensure a good 'work/life balance'? Do you get time to enjoy yourself without undermining your work and study?

### Example

#### Personal development

*I have been working long hours at college and at work recently. I added this up to 65 hours last week. I was supposed to go to my brother's birthday party but in the end had to work an extra shift as it was double pay. This was good for the money, but my family was disappointed. I'm not getting the right balance.*

*I need clear breaks with no work or study. I have to start planning out my time so I get time to rest and enjoy myself occasionally. Just stop. I have noticed that I am not sleeping well. It would be better for me to start earlier and then finish off earlier in the evening. Studying late just keeps me awake at night, rattling it all round in my head.*

*I am also neglecting my interest in music. I would really like to spend more time listening to recent releases. I could do this by ...*

## Evaluative reflection

### Questionnaires and checklists

Self-evaluation questionnaires are useful starting points for self-evaluation:

- the questions help to define the field, indicating the areas that are important to consider further
- the questionnaire can be used in a 'before' and 'after' way, enabling more precise comparisons between answers given at different times
- it is often difficult to answer a questionnaire with a straight 'yes' or 'no'. Those questions that resist easy answers prompt longer answers, indicating what the real issues might be for you
- questionnaires are usually good starting points. They are not particularly useful if used in isolation from other reflective methods.

## Critical event

One good way of finding out more about yourself is through an in-depth analysis of a single event. To begin with, select an occasion that was of some importance to you such as:

- the first time you ...
- the last time you ...
- a very difficult occasion
- a test of your values
- a test of your abilities
- a test of your will-power
- a test of character
- a turning point in your life
- a time you realised something unexpected about yourself or other people.

If you undertake this exercise several times you have valuable materials for reflecting on your performance. Consider:

- What themes emerge?
- What noticeable areas of improvement are there in your performance over time?
- What areas did you highlight for further action that you did not then attend to? What do you think is preventing you from doing so?

## Example

### Critical event

*I undertook a student project for MMM Manufacturers, spending one afternoon a week working with their development team. I was responsible for designing paper-based materials that made their new software easy to use for short-contract workers. I worked alongside the IT-development team in Human Resources, and one of these acted as a 'line manager'. I piloted my materials with ten part-time workers, and used their feedback to make some major changes.*

*The paper-based materials I produced were used by the company. That was a success, but the work experience was an important event to me for very different reasons. First of all, I had no confidence that I could work in that kind of environment or work to deadlines. I proved to myself that I could be relied on to carry out a job well.*

*I had been very anxious about piloting the materials. I imagined that people would be very critical and that I would get upset if I was criticised. During the pilot, I was determined to listen to what the part-timers had to say, as I wanted my materials to work. They said some very positive things but they also pointed out a lot of aspects that needed to be changed. I surprised myself. I stayed very calm and encouraged them to say what they really felt. What they said was actually very sensible – I could see how most of it would improve the materials.*

*I learnt the value of feedback as I was able to put it to good use. I also learned how important it is to allow people to be critical. My main achievement, from my perspective, was in 'taking it on the chin'. I accepted what was said without being devastated that everything wasn't perfect in the first place. This is something I have not been able to do in the past so I feel this has been an important turning point.*

*This experience will help me in my seminar group. For example, I used to see all feedback as a kind of attack on me ...*



### Reflection: Critical event

Select one event that is of key importance to you. Consider:

- What happened generally – the context?
- What did you do – your own role?
- What were the outcomes or consequences of your actions?
- What alternative actions could you have taken?
- How might you prepare differently for a similar occasion?
- How did your performance or action differ from your performance on other occasions? What were the reasons for this?
- How did you use or how could you use feedback from other people?
- What is the one main area where you need to focus to improve your performance? What do you need to do in order to take this forward?
- What did you gain and learn from the experience?

## Reflection: Critical event (continued)

Write down your answers to each of the above questions so that you have a record to which you can refer on future occasions.

NB If anyone else will see these reflections, check first that you have not included names or other information that identify people, departments or organisations without their express permission.

See Resource Bank, page 345.

## Using feedback

As a student, you will receive regular feedback on your work in ways you may never experience again. Such feedback, provided by experts who want you to succeed, is an extremely valuable resource. Be open to all feedback, irrespective of whether, in your opinion, it is fair and accurate or not.



*Latifa could always find constructive use for her tutor's feedback.*

You can use it as a basis for reflection on your development by:

- reading it! – and reading it again a few days later, as you probably will not be objective the first time you see it
- considering whether the comments are unexpected; if so, why is that?
- considering whether you agree with the comments. If not, what are the grounds for your disagreement?
- deciding if you want to see similar comments on future work. If so, consider what you can do next time in order to gain similar comments again. Bear in mind, that just doing the same

kinds of things may not draw the same positive feedback a second time – how will you build on your success so that you show you are developing from where you were before? If you disliked the feedback, what steps can you take to change or improve that area of your performance?

- considering sources of support available to you (books, web pages, tutors, support services) to address areas for improvement.

Put time aside at least two or three times a year to go over written feedback that you have received. Note any emergent themes as these may be losing or gaining you marks on a consistent basis. Jot down guidance for yourself on how you will address those points so that you really gain from having received this feedback, whether it pleased you or not.

## Varieties of feedback

Bear in mind that much of the feedback that you will receive both as a student and in life more generally is not written out as individual comments at the end of an essay. If there are comments that apply to most of a class, it can make more sense for the tutor to avoid writing these out individually for each student, and to provide these to the whole class verbally or through a group handout or on the course website. This is still important feedback for you to consider.

Look out for feedback that may be available to you in a wide range of formats depending on your programme, such as:

- short or passing verbal feedback on your performance during lab work, on the wards, in the studio, etc.
- comments provided on your ideas or an early plan or draft for an assignment
- opportunities created for you to receive feedback from other students, employers, clients, patients, or other stakeholders
- comments during a taught session which provide insights into what is expected of you as a student or for that module of study
- feedback from supervisors on work-placement.

If feedback is not provided in written form, consider how you will capture this and record it in your own notes so that you will be able to make use of it later.



## Models of reflection

Reflection is now a key component of many professions and courses of study. Various models of reflection have developed that provide structures for considering the rather abstract or 'fuzzy' concept of 'learning through reflection on your own experiences'. A summary of some key models is provided below, so that you can recognise these when you see or hear them referred to, and draw on them to develop your own model of reflection.

### The underlying concept

Reflective models, in summary, assume we can:

- 1 think about our experiences
- 2 understand them at a deeper level
- 3 learn from that thinking and understanding so as to effect change.

### Staged models

Models of reflection often break down the various reflective processes into steps or stages. These stages are usually represented in the form of a cycle, the idea being that we can use what we have learnt from active reflection in order to bring greater understanding and better forward planning to similar experiences in the future. The reflective process may be conceived of in different ways, with a number of stages depending on the model.

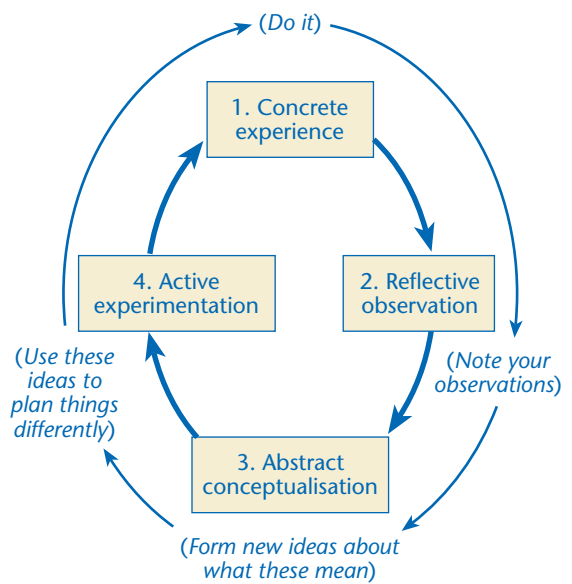
### Four stage Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb)

Kolb's *Cycle* (1984) has been particularly influential on the developments in thinking about experiential learning.

Kolb's cycle consists of four stages:

- 1 Concrete experience: experience or action
- 2 Reflective observation: actively taking note of what you are observing about that experience
- 3 Abstract conceptualisation: forming ideas about what you have observed
- 4 Active experimentation: putting those new ideas into practice.

The third stage, *abstract conceptualisation*, gives significance to the act of drawing generalisations – an important cognitive step in identifying how one experience could relate to others.



### Many-stage models

Other models have more and/or different stages, each focusing on particular components of the learning process such as:

- awareness of initial responses
- the impact of emotions on behaviour
- consideration of issues and theories
- etc.

A five-stage model, the core model for reflection (Cottrell, 2010), is provided below on page 207. Atkins and Murphy (1994) use a six-stage model incorporating stages for:

- *awareness* of thoughts and feelings
- *describing* these and the broader situation
- *analysing* them, challenging assumptions.



### Reflection: Working with staged models

How useful do you think the concept of 'stages' would be for your own reflection?

Are you likely to work better with:

- a model that has few stages, and you elaborate the details and prompts yourself?
- a model with more stages, with prompts provided that you select from as needed?

## Schön's model

Schön (1983) drew distinctions between reflecting:

- *in action*: reflecting on what you are doing whilst in the process of doing it, such as when experts call upon pre-existing knowledge as they work
- *on action*: making sense of an action or event once it is over, so as to learn from it for the future.

Many models refer back to this distinction. There is also a case for reflection:

- *before action*: drawing on knowledge (including theory), experience and input from others before you do something.

It is generally easier to reflect:

- *Before action*: as part of forward planning, putting aside time to find out useful information and examples of good practice, identifying relevant skills and learning or refreshing these; simulating difficult scenarios; practising what you are going to say or do, and giving thought to how this will all be put into action when needed.
- *On action*: putting time aside to think significant events through in detail, as outlined above.



### Reflection: 'Before action' and 'in action'

Your response for the reflection above, 'Critical event' (page 231), was an example of reflection *on action* – so if you managed that, you know what that kind of reflection feels like. What kind of reflection do you think you could also undertake:

- *Before action?* (How would you plan differently in future for that kind of scenario?)
- *In action*: whilst you are actually in the midst of the scenario? What would you be able to call to mind and do differently whilst 'in action'?

## Themes and focal points for reflection

There is a wide range of themes that could be used to provide a focus to reflection. For example, models could include broader contextual issues such as culture, society, politics, economics and media. These have an overarching influence on our experience – and our interpretations of that experience. Themes could include:

- Behaviours
- Interactions with or between others
- Feelings
- Knowledge
- Thoughts
- Theories
- Local practice
- Systems and structures
- Policies, procedures, rules
- Ideas
- Values
- Ethics
- Feedback from stakeholders
- Personal histories
- Language
- Broader issues (e.g. history, ideology, economics, politics, culture, media).

### Activity

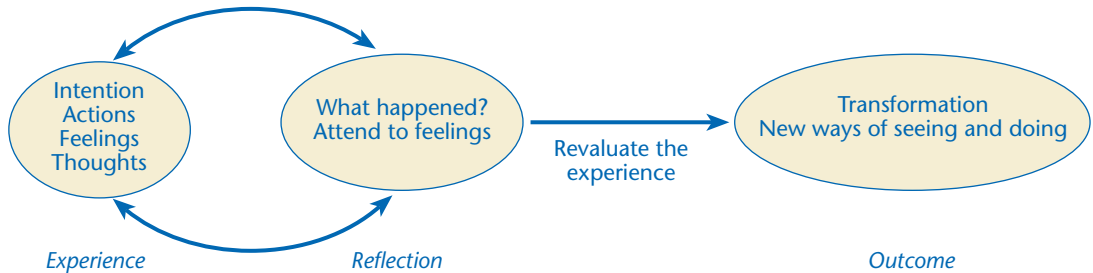


### Focus points for reflection

- Which of the points on the above list of focus points strike you as being of most relevance and interest to you when considering your experiences?

### Example: focus on feelings

Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) emphasised that experience, and reflections on experience, are both influenced by unconscious aspects such as emotions as well as conscious ones such as intent. Boud et al. argued that emotions tend to override our rational thinking without us being fully conscious of this, making us less aware of how and why we are acting as we do. If we re-evaluate an event, focusing on feelings and their impact, this helps us to identify how to manage similar events differently in the future.



Adapted from Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985)

## Developing your own model for reflection

### Your current model?

Does your current model for action and reflection sound at all like the following?

*I usually launch into action with a rough idea of what I think is needed. I work out my next steps as I go along, adapting to the evolving circumstances, using ideas that come into my head, or memories of doing something similar in the past, or other people's suggestions, or thinking on my feet as I read the situation and calculate what is needed. Often, I don't know why I did exactly what I did but it all works out pretty well anyway. Sometimes, if things go well, or someone compliments me, or if I feel things didn't go well, I find myself mulling over who did or said what, or what I should have said or done. I might remember this next time I am in that situation – but then again, I might not.*

If you recognise this scenario, then you are in good company. Much of the time, this approach works well enough. Depending on the task, we form unconscious expertise in a variety of ways, such as training, practice, hearsay, reading, watching TV, or being around others who are experts. However, this model doesn't include setting time aside specifically to focus in a structured way on how things might be improved for the better.



### Reflection: My current model

- Jot down a brief outline of how you approach your work and/or study or a particular kind of activity in which you engage.
- Is this generally true of you in most areas of life?

### Why develop a better model for yourself?

We saw above that reflecting on your learning and experience is regarded as a means of deepening your understanding of how and why things work out the way they do for you. This can help you to make better decisions and exercise more control over the outcome of events. Reflection is a valuable tool.

Unless you are required by your work or course to use a particular model of reflection, then there is value in devising a model that:

- makes sense to you
- with (or without) prompt questions
- with as many stages as you find useful
- adapting existing models or starting from scratch.

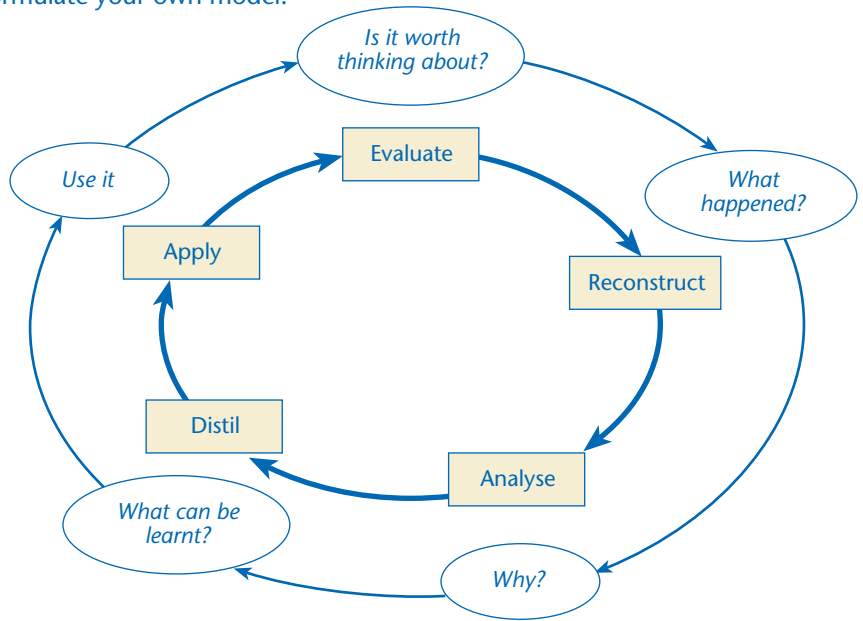
The 'Core Model' below is suggested for you to adapt, drawing if you wish upon the models outlined above and selecting those focus points (page 234) that you feel pertinent to your experience.

## Core Model for reflection

The Core Model below suggests 5 key components that you can draw from to help you formulate your own model.

- 1 Evaluate significance: is it worth reflection?
- 2 Reconstruct the experience: what happened?
- 3 Analyse: why did it happen that way?
- 4 Distil learning: draw out lessons for the future.
- 5 Apply: prepare for future situations.

Select those you find appropriate. Further details and prompts are provided below.



Core Model for Reflection (Cottrell, 2010)

### 1 Evaluate significance: Is it worth reflection?

Before launching into reflection, it is worth making an initial evaluation of the relative value of that experience as the focus of your reflective energies. Consider, for example, the following prompts:

- Will I encounter this kind of experience again?
- Could it provide lessons for the future?
- Does feedback from other people suggest I need to do this differently?
- Were there things I did really well that I could apply in the future?
- Would working this through help me understand niggles and concerns I have and how to deal with them?
- Is this a key aspect of my job that merits reflection from time to time?
- Would reflecting on this experience lead to positive outcomes for other people?
- Is there an aspect of my life, work or study that I take for granted but which could benefit from refreshed thinking?
- Does thinking about this experience arouse strong emotions suggesting it merits reflection?
- Is this the issue that most merits deeper reflection now?

### 2 Reconstructing the experience

This is the stage where you go through the surface aspects of the experience, from where you consider it 'starts' to where you consider it 'finishes'. Inevitably, this is an act of reconstruction, not an exact record. Draw out what you feel are the most salient points. You may find it helpful to consider the following prompts:

- *Events* Is it helpful to go through the storyline of the experience point by point, identifying who did what and when? Sometimes this helps to uncover details that might prove to be significant, sometimes not.
- *Intent* What was the purpose of your involvement? What were you aiming to achieve through your actions, words, silence or inaction?
- *Feelings* How did you feel during the experience? Do the feelings evoked in reconstructing the event throw any further light onto your own behaviour?

- *Your role* What role did you think you were playing at the time? In retrospect, what role did you play? What was the impact of your involvement? What might have been different if you had not been present, or if someone else had taken the part you played?
- *Other people* What part did others play? What could you have done to change the flow of interactions for the better?
- *Surface outcome* What was the outcome? Did it end well? well enough? as a disaster?

### 3 Analysis: Why did it happen that way?

This is the analytical stage, where you go behind the surface events to examine why things unfolded in the way they did and arrive at a deeper understanding. Consider such questions as:

- What interpretations, explanations and theories help me to make sense of it?
- What was really going on for me? For others? On that day? In the place?
- Were the final outcomes as intended? If not, why not?
- Which actions, words, or omissions were most significant in the way events unfolded – or on the final outcomes?
- What made the situation better or worse?
- Did the scenario have roots in something that pre-dated that occasion?
- Is it really 'finished' or are there loose ends and bad feelings that could be addressed?



### 4 Distil: What lessons can be learnt?

What lessons do you draw from your reflection? For example:

- Positive features that are worth applying in the future?
- Trigger points that could be better managed?
- Skills you exercised and qualities you demonstrated that you could apply to similar situations?
- Specific actions that you, personally, could take or omit in similar situations so that things run more smoothly, harmoniously or with better consequences?
- Ways of tracking and managing your emotions and responses differently?
- Areas for training or practice?
- Awareness of other people's needs or issues and how these could be addressed differently?
- Would different preparation, planning, or timing produce better outcomes?
- Could different theoretical models apply?

### 5 Apply: Prepare for future situations

In this stage, give active consideration to how you will make use of your reflections so that they have an impact on future experiences. For example:

- *Identify your wish list* What do you want to be different?
- *Identify potential scenarios* What kinds of situations are suitable for applying what you have learnt?
- *Identify the consequences* What will be different as a result of you changing the way you do things?
- *Who are the beneficiaries* Who will gain as a result of these changes? What will be different for them?
- *Identify personal benefit that will motivate you to act* What will you gain through these changes?
- *What will you do differently?* (Focus on what you personally can do or say – as these are most under your control.)
- *Advance planning* What preparation do you need to do now so as to respond differently in such situations in future?
- *Plan memory-joggers* Once those situations arise, what will trigger your memory about what you wish to do?

## Devise your own model for reflection

Jot down the steps or stages that you consider you would find it helpful to have in your model. In deciding this, give thought to the different steps you feel that you need to draw your attention to – so that you don't miss them out. Balance that against the number of steps that you feel will motivate you and be easy to remember.

Looking at the 'Core Model' above (page 236), decide whether you would wish to merge some of those stages into one or, alternatively, divide up further some of the stages of the Core Model.

Once you have decided on the number of steps, give each a name. Naming the stages may cause you to reconsider how many stages are really useful for you.


Once you have decided on your stages and the order that you want to place them in, use the proforma on page 239, to record these. If you find that you want to include more than six stages, copy the table and use two or more sheets.

- Use the first column to number your stages.
- Use the second column to record the name of each stage.
- Use the third column to devise a range of 'prompt questions' to structure your reflection. If you are not sure what to include, draw on those in the Core Model, on pages 236–7, as a starting place.

### Activity



### Test your personal model for reflection

-  Identify one event – using step 1 of the 'Core Model for Reflection'.
- Using the model you have designed, work through your own stages and prompts.
- Consider, then, whether you wish to adapt your model.

## Presenting your reflection to others

### Raw reflection: first stage reflection

Most of us engage quite naturally in very deep reflection when we do it in our own time and way. It is important to capture such reflections in a way that suits our personal styles. However, such 'first stage' reflections are in raw form. They are not usually accessible to other people and are not necessarily in a form that is useful to you.

### Worked reflection: second stage reflection

Second-stage reflection is characterised by:

*Time* Leaving time between the initial reflection and the current stage of reflection.

*Summary* Second-stage reflection seeks out and summarises key themes and salient points, noting down where more detailed evidence can be found in the portfolio.

*Insight* Identifying what has been learnt – especially the less obvious learning. This will refer to broad themes rather than specific subject knowledge. It will bring out issues of relevance and significance rather than focus on data. During second-stage reflection you come to appreciate the deeper and subtler aspects of your learning.

*Communication* It is at this point that you are ready to consider presenting the results of your reflection to others. The context will determine what it is appropriate to show to others. For most purposes, you will need to remove:

- material about your personal life you wish to keep private
- personal details about other people
- repetitive or irrelevant material
- unnecessary examples
- materials produced by other people, such as guideline materials, tutor notes, copies of background reading, lecture notes, etc.

# Personal model for reflection

See page 238 for guidance on devising your model for reflection and using this pro-forma.

Stage number	Name of this stage	Prompt questions

### **Submitting reflections to tutors**

You may be asked to submit your reflections to tutors either as part of assessment, or for more informal monitoring. If so, you may be asked to submit either raw or worked reflections, or both. For example, you may be asked to submit a journal, log or extracts from a blog as part of a portfolio of materials.

Alternatively you might be asked to draw on your reflections as the basis of work undertaken in class or to provide material within an assessment such as an essay, case study, position paper or observation, without there being a requirement to submit your journal.

### **Confidentiality**

**NB** If anyone else will see these reflections, check first that you have not included names or other information that identify people, departments or organisations without their express permission. The details you provide should not enable people to make a good guess at who is being referred to in your reflections or any other assignment.

### **Submitting selective portfolios**

If your tutors are going to mark your portfolio, they will look for such factors as:

*How well it meets the required learning outcomes.* How well the portfolio overall meets the learning outcomes of the unit, module or course; make sure you know what these are before you start to put your portfolio together. These are usually provided in a handbook or on a website for the course.

*How well you summarise your insights into your learning* (or the subject of the portfolio). Most marks are likely to be given for the reflective essay, position paper or similar document, which draws together the main points, rather than for raw reflection and supporting documents, important though these are too.

*How well you select and edit relevant information for inclusion in the portfolio.* Large, unedited portfolios that contain all the information you could possibly gather on a subject are unlikely to impress. Bulk does not usually gain marks. The tutor is likely to give marks specifically for skills in selecting,

drawing out clearly what is relevant, good editing and cross-referencing.

*How well the evidence and examples you refer to in the portfolio really do support the point you are making.* If you say the evidence demonstrates a particular skill or insight, it must be a very clear example. You need to specify how skills or the application of theory were demonstrated, rather than assuming these are obvious to the tutor.

*How well the portfolio is constructed.* Clear contents; all documents labelled; the summary writing makes exact cross-references to the page where the evidence can be found. Use a highlighter pen or number the lines to indicate exactly where the tutor should look to find the evidence if these are submitted in paper form. If you are submitting this electronically, you can use editing and reviewing functions such as those for inserting comments, to provide a commentary on your text. If you make vague references to long free-ranging reflections, leaving the tutor to find what you are referring to, this is unlikely to be accepted.

*How well you select one or two good pieces of evidence for each main point you make.* More than one piece of evidence is usually not needed or wanted.

*How well you draw on relevant theory as part of your reflections.* If you are submitting work as part of an academic assessment, then it is generally assumed that you will demonstrate that you are aware of which theories are relevant and how these provide insights on the issue under consideration.

In other words, good guidance for portfolios is:

- include a contents page and a strong summary document (e.g. position paper or essay)
- label and signpost clearly
- back up your main points with good evidence
- cross-reference your argument clearly to evidence in the portfolio
- include only essential evidence
- keep it as succinct as possible.



## A reflective essay

### *Purpose*

Some programmes set reflective essays as marked assignments. The contents of the essay will vary depending on the focus of the programme and the purpose of the essay. For example, some programmes ask for a reflective piece of writing at the beginning of the programme in order to encourage students to focus on their goals and learning needs. Others set an essay at the end of a module for students to draw together their learning and identify next steps.

Usually, you will be given specific guidance on what is required. If not, the guidance below outlines features typical of reflective essays. The structure is not dissimilar to that of other essays. The content and style are distinct.

### *Structure*

Like any other essay, a reflective essay will have:

- a specific title: you must structure your essay to respond to the question contained within the title
- an introduction that identifies your overall position and prepares the reader for what to expect from the essay
- a main body divided into paragraphs: this does not usually contain any headings or bullet points
- a conclusion that sums up the main points: this does not introduce any new material
- references to source materials within the text
- a list of all references at the end of the text.

### *Contents of a reflective PDP essay*

Typically, a reflective essay will contain a selection of the following elements.

#### **Personal aims and goals**

- Why did you choose your programme: what were your aims and objectives?

- Have these changed since starting the programme? In what ways and for what reasons?

#### **Expectations**

- What were you expecting from the programme?
- What did you expect from yourself?
- What led you to form these expectations?

#### **Programme learning outcomes**

- What are the learning outcomes for modules you have taken so far?
- What skills development is linked to the modules you have taken?
- How do these outcomes and skills correspond to your own aims and goals?

#### **Other activity**

- What else do you do outside of your programme in order to achieve your personal goals or to supplement your learning for the programme?

#### **Learning goals and targets**

- What are your current areas of strength in relation to your programme, career or life ambitions?
- Which areas do you need to improve?
- What are the priority areas for improvement as 'learning goals'?
- What are your targets, milestones and time-scales for meeting these learning goals?

#### **Personal reflection**

- What methods have you used for reflection?
- How do you use reflection?
- A detailed example of how you developed and evaluated your performance in one area.

### Use of feedback

- What kinds of feedback have you received from tutors, students, employers or other people?
- How do you feel about this feedback?
- How have you made use of this feedback?

### Evaluation of personal choices

- In practice, how far does the programme meet personal goals and interests?
- Would any other programme or set of modules be more suitable for you?
- What other subject choices, additional modules or supplementary programmes would help you to meet your personal goals?

### Evaluation of learning

- How well are you achieving the learning outcomes of your programme?
- What else have you learnt through the programme?
- What are you gaining, additionally, from your programme or from university that was not part of your original goals?

### Evaluation of the programme

- How does each module or aspect of your programme contribute to your professional and personal development?

### Evaluation of personal performance

- How well are you achieving your personal goals?
- How well have you engaged with your programme? (Attendance? Punctuality? Level of interest? Contributions made in class? Efforts to make personal meaning of the course material? Additional reading or work undertaken?)
- How far do you consider you have taken responsibility for improving your own learning?

### Personal development

- How have your opinions, attitudes, beliefs or values changed since starting at university?
- In what ways have you changed as a person since starting at university?

### Critical incident

- Identify an incident that illustrates your approach to your learning.
- What does this incident demonstrate about you?
- How does this incident relate to any theories of learning you have covered on your programme?
- What did you learn from this incident?
- See the Reflection on p. 231 above, and the Critical Incident Sheet in the Resource Bank, page 345.

### Use of theory

A reflective essay is still an academic piece of work. You should draw on your background reading for the subject, relating your own experiences to the theoretical perspective relevant to your programme of study. Consider:

- Does your experience support or exemplify theories you have covered in class or through your background reading?
- Or does your experience run counter to those theories? If so, why might that be the case? What is different about your experience that might account for this?

### Style

Reflective essays are about your own experience. This means that it is more acceptable for these to be written in the first person ('I', 'We').

## Personal statement

Personal statements are important tools for making real use of on-going observation, reflection and evaluation. They are characterised by:

- being written in a more formal manner than reflection for personal purposes
- drawing together learning that has taken place
- identifying themes (from a portfolio or journal) and summarising these
- identifying the overall path that developmental work has taken over a period of time
- identifying the lessons that have been learnt
- evaluating current performance

- making recommendations for future improvement
- identifying action that needs to be taken.

The emphasis of a personal statement may differ depending on whether it is written:

- at the beginning of a programme
- as developmental work within a programme
- for assessment or submission at the end of a programme
- for a specific purpose such as a job application.

An example is provided on page 213.

### Example

#### Personal statement

*This semester, I took three modules in Business Studies. These covered project management, business communication and entrepreneurship. I was able to draw out several themes that ran across the three modules.*

*First of all, the communication skills were important in identifying ways of varying a message so that it comes across to very different audiences: client groups, bank managers, the buying public, products aimed at different age groups and at people who purchase for those client groups. We also focused on communication within teams.*

#### Communication skills

*Communication skills were important to my entrepreneurship project as I was part of a team that took a product (light-weight collapsible bikes) through from idea to design to market. We drew up a business plan that we presented to a funding panel. There was an accountant on the panel who gave us feedback on our presentations. Although our group did not win the funding, we were given valuable advice on what a business plan should look like and how to communicate its strengths when asking for funding.*

*The entrepreneurship students were not all from a business background: some were from product design, fine art, engineering, marketing and multi-*

*media. One important lesson was in discovering that students from each discipline use very different ways of describing their work process and the product than we expect from a business perspective. Although we learnt that we have to find a common vocabulary, a shared way of communicating, we could have approached this in a more organised way and avoided some misunderstandings. Communication for team work across disciplines is an area that I would like to investigate further.*

#### Team work

*The product designers and engineers, in particular, approached their work in ways that the business students found challenging. This meant that we had to establish ground rules for working together as a team. This took several attempts because our starting points were so different. We had not anticipated this and did not realise in the beginning, each of us was unwilling to compromise on methods we had been trained in.*

*However, as the deadlines drew closer, we made a choice to develop a hybrid way of working that met the needs of the project rather than what we thought we should do as 'business students' or 'design students'. This felt like a risky strategy but we were encouraged by our tutors, who gave us some useful tips on how to negotiate a strategy ...*

## Position papers

A position paper is a 'snapshot' of where you are now, which draws together reflections on your personal development. Typically, its format follows a time-line from past to future. You are usually asked to:

- look back over past experience and identify what you have learned from your experience
- evaluate your current position
- project forward to where you wish to be
- decide a plan of action that takes you from where you are now to where you wish to be in the future, using your past experience
- identify how you will be able to recognise when you have achieved your goals.

To write a position paper, you can draw upon entries from your reflective journal, responses to activities in this book, self-evaluations and action plans. A possible structure is suggested below, organised through a series of questions. You can use these to guide you, selecting relevant questions. Where possible, include references to texts you have read in order to support your reasoning.

### Orientation

Aspirations and motivation: where am I going?

- What are your aims for your future? Where would you like to see yourself in five or ten years' time? (Be imaginative and bold.)
- In what ways do you think your programme will help you to achieve those aims?
- What skills and attributes do you want to develop whilst at university?

### Review

What do I bring from my past?

- What has led you to the present stage in your study or career?
- What has inspired you? (Give references where possible.)

- How has your past learning and life experience equipped you for this course and for being a student now? Evaluate the knowledge, qualifications, skills, attitudes and experiences that you bring with you and which are relevant to your study and goals.

### Appraisal

Where am I now?

- What skills and abilities will be required of you as a student on this course?
- What are your main strengths and weaknesses as a student on this course?
- What will you need to improve in order to do well?

### Planning

How will I achieve my aims?

- How do you plan to achieve your ambitions and study aims? What are you going to do, when and how?
- What targets have you set as milestones (to what time-scales)?
- What difficulties might you encounter?
- In what ways might you sabotage your own success? What steps will you take to prevent yourself or others from sabotaging your success?
- How will you keep yourself motivated?
- What other preparation and planning do you need to undertake?

### Evaluating progress

What have I achieved?

- How will you be able to recognise that you have achieved your aims?
- What changes do you expect to see in yourself, your work, and in the attitudes of others when you have achieved your aims?
- How will you be able to demonstrate to others what you have achieved?

## Extrapolation

What have I learned?

- What have you learned about yourself or your learning that was unexpected in some way?
- How might this learning help you more generally with your studies, life and work?

## References

Include references to books, films, music or other sources that have inspired you on your journey to where you are today. Include references to all materials you have used in writing the position paper. Remember to use the correct referencing system, such as the Harvard or Vancouver system, as recommended by your tutors.

## Example

### Sample introduction

*In this position paper, I demonstrate how my past experiences and future objectives are influencing my current study on a degree in media technology. The paper is based on an in-depth consideration of my previous life and learning experiences, and shows the ways in which prior learning has provided me with skills, knowledge and personal qualities that are relevant to my present studies. In particular, I draw attention to the range of skills and insights I acquired through working as a volunteer last summer and how these, unexpectedly, have provided me with starting points for design work on the degree.*

*My main aim is to use this qualification to advance my professional career. This position paper outlines both the areas I need to investigate in order to improve my career prospects and my reasons for the module choices I have made for next year. It also looks at skills I need to improve next year to improve my course marks. In addition, I demonstrate how the programme I am on and the decisions I am making will help me to achieve my goals.*

## Closing comments

Reflection is not something that comes easily to everyone. However, there are many strategies and approaches that can be used to develop your skills in undertaking reflection. Reflective abilities develop over time and with practice.

- Put time aside on a regular basis to reflect upon your performance.
- Use a structured approach. Make use of activities in the book if you are not sure where to begin.
- Read back over your reflections on a regular basis. Look for themes.
- Consider regularly how far you have achieved personal goals.
- Find approaches that suit you and your programme.
- Look for changes in yourself, your actions, goals or values.
- Notice and celebrate your achievements.
- Be positive about the process: over time, you will see the benefits.

## Further reading

- Boud, D., Keogh, R. and Walker, D. (1985) *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (London: Routledge).
- Buzan, T. (2006) *The Mind Map Book* (London: BBC Active).
- Cottrell, S. M. (2010) *Skills for Success*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Cottrell, S.M. (2011) *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Argument* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Cottrell, S.M. (2013) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 4th edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Mezirow, J. (ed.) (1990) *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).
- Moon, J. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* (London: RoutledgeFalmer).
- Thompson, S. and Thompson, N. (2008) *The Critically Reflective Practitioner* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).