

Study Skills Series



Reflective writing
REFLECTIVE WRITING

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Reflective writing: getting the most from the reflective process

The concept of reflection as a learning tool is well recognized within educational literature. Reflection has become an established mechanism to enable practitioners from different occupational backgrounds to learn from the experiences they have in their practice.

Donald Schön in his seminal work, the Reflective Practitioner (Schön1984), suggests that reflection is a means of accessing the tacit or practice based knowledge that is acquired through developing expertise. This is also known as professional artistry.

Reflection can be an enlightening process in that it can help practitioners to gain new insights into the way they are as people and professionals. These insights can enlighten the practitioner as to what it is that holds them and others back from developing. This process can be an empowering one leading to emancipatory change (Mezirow 2000).

Although reflection can occur through thoughtful contemplation and action, the act of committing reflections to paper may enhance the learning experience by enabling the learner to:-

- *make sense of the situation,*
- *use theory to support their analyses,*
- *identify learning and development*
- *devise an action plan for change*

Selecting a framework for writing reflections

It is advisable that you use a framework to help you structure your reflection to ensure that you cover all aspects of the reflective process from describing your experience to your developmental action plan. There are a bewildering array of reflective frameworks and models to choose one. Whilst it is a good idea to choose a framework you feel comfortable with, some are better suited to certain levels of academic writing than others.

Which one should I choose then?

The Institute has produced a booklet in this Study Skills Series detailing 7 different reflective frameworks or models. The booklet entitled '*Models for Reflection*' provides an overview of the key elements of each model. Under each element the reflector is provided with a series of cues or questions to help them work through the reflective process. It should be remembered that the reflector is not required to respond to all the cues and questions posed, but should select those that have most relevance to their experience(s).

Top-tips for writing reflections

- Don't always choose the unusual or action packed incident to reflect on, it is sometimes useful to stop and reflect on those everyday incidents which are never given any thought. This will keep your practice current and challenge ritual.
- Make some notes soon after the incident as you may forget important details later on.
- When describing the incident keep it factual, short and to the point, make no attempt to analyse at this stage or explain any terminology
- Select a reflective framework that suits your academic level and the issues you wish to reflect on.
- Follow the framework closely to ensure that you cover all aspects of the reflective process.
- Take time to read around the issues you have identified as this will provide further insights into your analysis. Remember there are many ways of viewing a situation; reading widely will help you to see things from different angles.
- Critical reflection involves the use of the literature to support your analyses and the action plan you will make for future development.
- Clearly identify what you have learnt from the situation; be honest with yourself. Use this learning to identify an action plan for change. This final element is often forgotten when in fact it is the most important.
- You may want to keep a reflective journal or diary to capture your thoughts and feelings following an experience. You can then take time to reflect on the event at a later date when you have time to think. This technique has the added benefit of detailing the key aspects of the experience close to the event; your memory is not always reliable.
- There is also some benefit in sharing your reflections with others within a supervisory relationships. This will help you to keep a healthy balance of identifying areas for growth and learning, without the process spiraling into destructive thought.

Frequently asked questions

What happens if I reflect on unsafe practice undertaken by another person?

This is a difficult one. The idea is to reflect on your own practice and to write a reflection primarily about yourself. However if you are involved in a situation where you witnessed another individual failing to provide safe practice, you may want to consider how you responded to this situation. You have to be careful with this one, as you don't want to appear that you are supporting unsafe practice. The lecturing staff will be able to advise you.

Do I have to show all my written reflections to my mentor?

No, the only reflections you need to show your mentor are those that directly support your achievement of your learning contract and practice competencies. However it is always useful to discuss your reflections with your mentor as they will be able to guide you to think of different ways of analyzing your incident, drawing conclusions and making recommendations for practice.

Checklist: have you written a good reflection?

1. Is there a clear description of the event, with no superfluous information, which sets the context of the situation?
2. Is there a recognition of your feelings and the significance of these in the incident described?
3. Is there a focus on yourself and the reasons for your own behaviour as well as others?
4. Has the incident been considered from a number of different perspectives and view points?
5. Is there an action plan that identifies areas for further development and learning?
6. Have you used a framework to structure the reflection?
7. Have you used theory to support the analysis and action plan?

References

Mezirow, J et al (2000) *Learning as transformation: critical perspectives on a theory in progress*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Schon, D. (1983) *The reflective practitioner*, London: Temple Smith