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11. Reflection

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‘The best thing any education can bequeath is the habit of reflection and questioning.’ (AC Grayling, The Guardian: 22.7.00)

What is reflection?

When we reflect, we consider deeply something which we might not otherwise have given much thought to. This helps us to learn. Reflection is concerned with consciously looking at and thinking about our experiences, actions, feelings and responses and then interpreting or analysing them in order to learn from them (Boud *et al.*, 1994; Atkins and Murphy, 1994). Typically we do this by asking ourselves questions about what we did, how we did it and what we learnt from doing it.

Schön (1991) distinguishes between *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action* in the following way:

Reflection-in-action is concerned with practicing critically. So, a physiotherapy student working with a client on an exercise programme is making decisions about the suitability of particular exercises, which exercise to do next and judging the success of each exercise at the same time as they are conducting the activity.

Reflection-on-action on the other hand, occurs after the activity has taken place when you are thinking about what you (and others) did, judging how successful you were and whether any changes to what you did could have resulted in different

outcomes. This is usually the type of reflection which you are asked to write about as part of your studies.

Here is an example of *reflection-on-action* in the discipline of Social Work:

You are a social work student reflecting on a role-play which you participated in earlier in the day. The role-play involved various professionals, including social workers and their clients. Reflection leads you to recall the planning you did *before* the role play began, the events and processes which took place *during* the role play, the way you responded to other participants and your overall contribution to the role-play. You may note interactions with which you were either satisfied or dissatisfied and you might also have ideas for how it could have been done differently. Reflecting on this event will also have the result of reminding you about how the role-play made you feel: frustrated, confident etc.

Box 1: Reflection-on-action

Reflecting on academic or professional practice in this way may make your personal beliefs, expectations and biases more evident to you. This understanding of yourself should help you to carry out your studies more successfully as it makes you aware of the assumptions that you might make automatically or uncritically as a result of your view of the world.

Becoming reflective

The skills associated with stepping back and pausing to look, listen and reflect, are closely related to those concerned with critical thinking which also requires you to 'unpack' whatever you are focusing on, not simply accept what you read or hear at face value. Through this process you will probably identify things you would not otherwise notice. Moon (2004: 181) notes similarities between being reflective and using an imaginary instrument called a 'pensieve' (Rowling, 2000: 518) in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*:

'One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.'
(Rowling, 2000: 518)

The key to reflecting is spotting the patterns and links in thought which emerge as a result of your experiences in life and in learning. Sometimes this is difficult for learners because the focus is on **you** and this might not feel comfortable – especially in an academic context where you are usually encouraged to depersonalise your work – particularly your essays and reports. Remember, you try to avoid saying 'I' in essays? So, when writing reflectively, you need to find a way to be both academic and also personal and that is not always easy. You may be both referencing academic theory and, in the same piece of writing, describing an exciting learning experience you had during a seminar. Becoming reflective is, in part about feeling comfortable with this dual process.

The great benefit of including reflection in your learning is that, by understanding why you do something in a particular way and recognising how you feel about it, you can spot where your strengths and weaknesses lie. This gives you the chance to build on your strengths and develop strategies to minimise your weaknesses.

Here is an example of this in the context of essay-writing:

You might think that you are not very good at writing essays. Closer reflection might help you to see that, of the many different things which could present you with problems, getting started on the actual writing of an essay is the thing you have the greatest difficulty with. By using strategies which help you to overcome that particular challenge when writing essays, you can change your whole perception of yourself as an essay-writer.

Strategy 1: *free-writing* - write on the topic of your choice for a specified length of time, such as 5 minutes, without stopping, reading back or editing at all. This technique should get you writing and thinking.

Note: The text you produce through free-writing is not going to form part of the finished version of your essay but it should help you to get over the writing hurdle (for more information about free-writing, see: Elbow, 1998).

Strategy 2: *mind mapping* – use a mind-map to plan and organise all your content, literature and allocate numbers of words to each section. Begin writing straight away starting with any section of the essay *except* the introduction and in the end, you can jigsaw it all together.

Box 2: Using reflection to improve essay writing

Did you know that your beliefs about learning are extremely powerful and very difficult for you to change? So, if you believe that exams are the best form of assessment, even positive experiences with coursework assessments will not easily dislodge your learner belief. Your feelings also influence your learning and it can be both fascinating and uncomfortable to use reflection to 'discover' how you really feel!

Here is an example of how your feelings influence your learning:

You are learning a foreign language and you don't like speaking in the foreign language in class because you feel self-conscious. So you contribute as little as possible and this has an effect on your learning. Your friend, on the other hand, loves speaking in the foreign language and speaks as much as possible. Your feelings have led to completely different learning experiences.

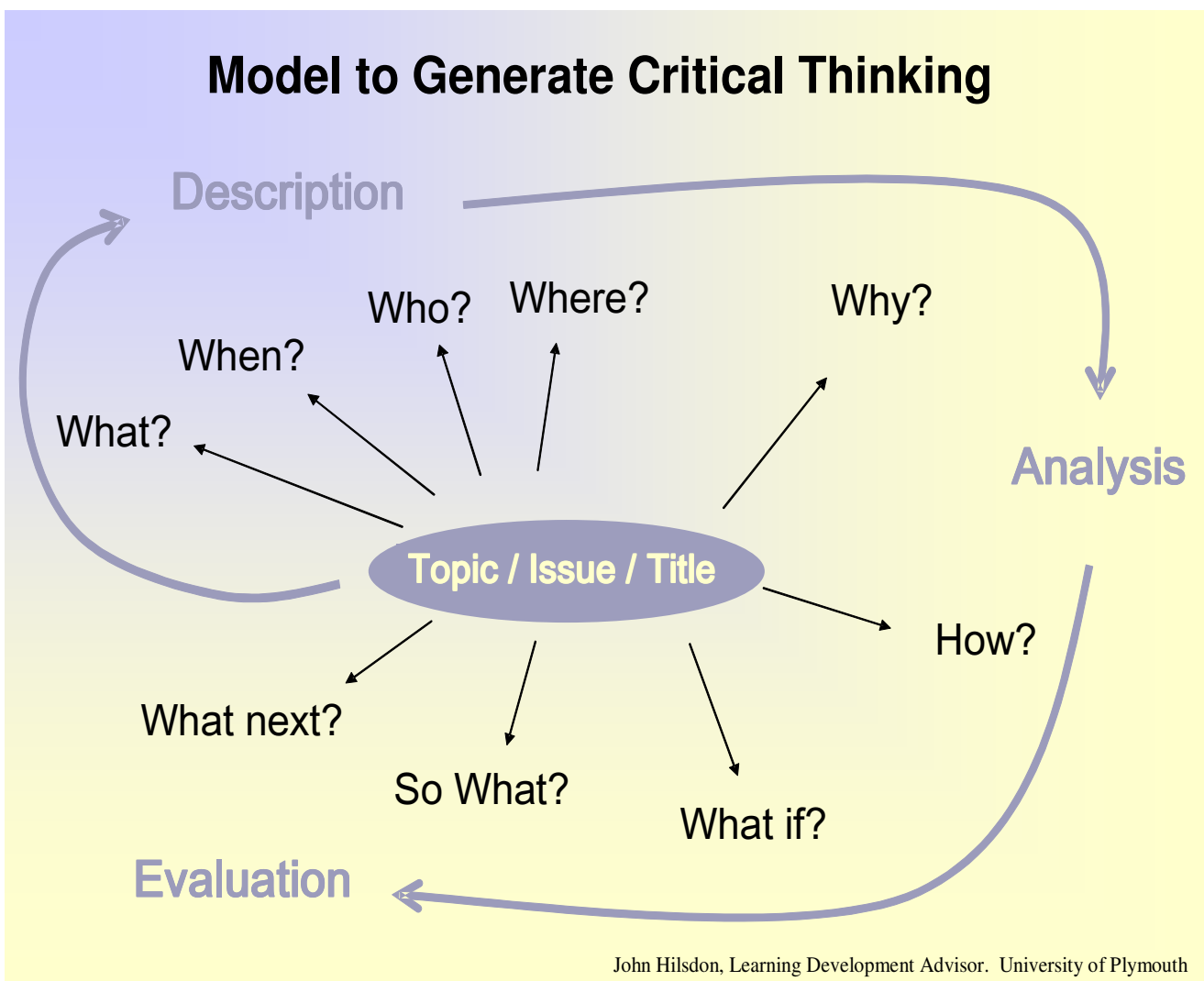
Box 3: Feelings and learning

Do not be discouraged by the suggestion, discussed by Moon, that some people simply cannot reflect (Moon, 2004: 88) because it is at odds with their way of thinking. It does appear to be true that some learners have difficulty in understanding what is required of them or resist engaging with reflection and it may also be true that some subject disciplines have an approach which corresponds better with reflective discourse than others.

However, there are ways in which you can overcome these challenges and one way is to use the Critical Thinking Model (Fig: 1, below).

The Critical Thinking Model is especially helpful for those learners for whom reflective thinking and writing seems at odds with the type of study they usually do – but it is, of course, a useful model for all learners. The Critical Thinking Model contains a set of carefully ordered questions which move you, step-by-step through a thinking process. First you are encouraged to be descriptive, then critically analytical and finally evaluative. Each part of this process is important, but taken together, it provides a question framework which should ensure that you have addressed critical analysis or, in this case, reflection, fully. Use of this Model for Critical Thinking enables anyone to practise reflection successfully.

Figure 1: Model to Generate Critical Thinking



The progression through question types from thinking which is mostly descriptive to thinking which is much more analytical, reflective and evaluative, does require you to actually formulate the question words into proper questions which will help you to really examine the experience you are reflecting on. This takes practice – it may not be easy the first time you try to do it.

Who was there? (*descriptive*)
 What did she say? (*descriptive*)
 What did I say? (*descriptive*)
 Why did I respond in that way? (*analytical/reflective*)
 How did each of us feel as a result? (*analytical/reflective*)
 What if I had chosen my words more carefully? (*analytical/reflective*)
 So what? Would that have made any difference to the outcome? (*reflective/evaluative*)
 Where can I go from here in my interactions with this person? (*reflective/evaluative*)

Box 3: Formulating questions for reflection

The questions in Box 3: *Formulating questions for reflection* are simple examples connected with a particular learning situation. All three phases – description, analysis and evaluation - are important and must be included. This reflection is designed to help the learner to improve their effectiveness when working with a partner. It might lead the reflective learner to modify their behaviour or choice of language in a future pair working situation and this could contribute to more successful outcomes.

How is reflective practice applied in academic life?

There are numerous ways in which reflection has been incorporated into study processes and certain settings for reflection will link naturally with specific disciplines. So, work placements are a logical choice for reflection on vocational courses such as nursing and teaching. In this section some of these settings for reflection are briefly explained:

Placements: Practice-based learning, and work-based learning are examples of vocationally-oriented experiential learning in which the learner participates as a member of a community of practice for a period of time and the resulting learning is measured and assessed formally. Reflection commonly forms part of this assessment, often through use of a learning log which is kept throughout the placement. Alternatively, a critical incident analysis form may be used and a set of descriptive and reflective questions answered in respect of a specific 'learning moment'.

Knowledge construction: Approaches to learning such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) are primarily concerned with problem-solving through asking questions, testing hypotheses and finding ways forward by the application of theory in practical settings. The resultant learning is substantially located in the project processes, how they were decided and how they were enacted. Reflection provides the ideal vehicle for expression of these concepts.

Action learning: is a variation on *learning by doing* in which learners work in small groups called Action Learning Sets with the aim of collaborating to improve their individual performances over a period of time. One participant explains to the group a situation which is problematic to her and to which no obvious solution is evident. The set asks questions and, together, they analyse the situation and formulate a possible solution. The solution is then tested and the action learning cycle is completed if the solution is successful or repeated if the solution is unsuccessful.

Research methods: Action Research (AR) and Exploratory Practice (EP) are examples of research methods which embed reflection in the research process and are particularly well-suited to practitioner research – where you examine your own professional practice.

Reflection on the study experience: some modules allocate a percentage of the module mark to an assessed piece of reflective writing which embraces the whole learning of the module or alternatively may be focused on a critical learning incident within it.

Reflective Writing

Whilst you can develop skills and strategies to help you to reflect, as described previously, reflection is more than a set of skills, it is an expression of the natural relationship that exists between learning and language (Hilsdon, 2006). The process of finding the words to express something with which you are already familiar often seems to distil and crystallise it and you see it with new eyes. Sometimes, the heightened awareness that comes with reflection generates new understandings and you get a completely new perspective – this is the benefit of putting reflection into words.

A learning log is a regularly updated journal where you can record your experiences as a learner. It is frequently used to activate the reflective thinking process. Sometimes it forms part of the academic assessment itself and at other times it simply contributes to the body of experience you draw on when producing reflective writing.

As reflection is slippery (Moon, 2004: 4), it is advisable to pin experiences down whilst they are still fresh in your mind. If you leave it for a while, it may be hard to recall exactly what happened and how you felt about it, so you may lose accuracy. A good learning log not only describes what happens but also asks critical questions about why and how this occurs and may also introduce variables or alternative scenarios which might have been possible, leading to alternative outcomes. Frequently the learning log provides an opportunity for you to express your feelings about parts of the learning process.

Reflective writing for assessment

Reflective writing is firmly established as a valuable learning process and, in view of this, it forms part of the assessment of many courses. This section identifies and addresses some of the challenges this raises for learners:

Too descriptive: failing to achieve a balance between description, analysis and evaluation is the most common challenge faced by students writing reflectively for assessment. The narrative of *what* happened is usually told in detail as an interesting story, and the next stage, in which you process this narrative account and ‘unpack’ the experience by asking relevant questions such as ‘*why*’ and ‘*how*’, does not take place at all, or only slightly.

Writing style: reflective writing combines academic and personal or diarist genres. Unlike most academic writing you do, which discourages use of the first person pronoun ‘I’, in an attempt to depersonalise the writing and make it more objective, reflective writing for assessment needs to use ‘I’, since the writing *is* personalised. However, you are also trying to maintain a degree of objectification so that your writing ‘sounds’ academic at the same time. You might feel that you have not really got to grips with finding your academic voice yet and you are already being asked to do something different. This is a challenge. As a consequence of the combination of the academic and the personal, there is some risk of dissonance or lack of consistency of style.

Reflective writing for assessment presents another style problem. Since the content of the reflection is ‘real-life’, it is tempting to write as you speak. This is acceptable in a non-assessed learning log but less appropriate in writing for assessment. A student midwife might talk about ‘mum’ and ‘baby’ because that is typical of the language used during the ward placement. In fact, the slightly more formal reference to ‘mother’ and ‘child’ is actually more appropriate in academic writing.

Honesty: If you believe that there is a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ set of values or way of thinking within your academic discipline, you may feel that honesty in reflection is not a priority. You may be so concerned to *get it right* that you would prefer it if someone told you what you should think because you don’t want to drop marks for thinking the wrong thing.

Disclosure: one of the issues facing you when you are writing reflectively for assessment is how you can “protect the ‘**sensitive frontiers**’ (Bolton, 2001) between personal and professional life” (Hilsdon, 2006:68). This might relate to ethical questions concerning those with whom you are working and how you feel about ‘exposing’ them in your writing. It also concerns yourself and the extent to which you are prepared to open yourself up to

scrutiny by assessors – perhaps of your innermost thoughts – and how you are going to feel when this generates a numerical response – a mark – as it will. The assessment may feel like more of a judgement of you as a person than essay marks do.

Check list/tips

- Start your reflection as soon as you can. You will forget things with time and may lose valuable learning experiences or even marks as a result.
- Do some free writing on your experiences to get you started
- Use the reflective questions on page 5 to improve your critical approach.
- Remember that reflective writing is personal; it's OK to write about your feelings and emotions.
- Get the balance right, don't be too descriptive. The marks will be awarded for analysis and synthesis. It's easy to write about what happened where, it's the why, how and what if which is really important.
- Keep practicing, your reflective skills and therefore your understanding and learning will improve
- Read your work aloud to yourself to check the formality of the language. Remember, if it is to be assessed it needs to sound academic.

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