

Reflecting on Your Practice

McDougall (1992 p34)ⁱ describes 'reflective practice' as '*encouraging students critically to examine the relationship between theory and practice in their work experience and developing skills and attitudes which will enable them to monitor and control their progress and professional development.*'

Neil Thompson, in his book, *People Skills*, explains that a reflective practitioner is 'a worker who is able to use experience, knowledge and theoretical perspectives to guide and inform practice. However, this does not mean applying ideas in a blanket form, unthinkingly and uncritically, regardless of the circumstances. Reflective practice involves cutting the cloth to suit the specific circumstances, rather than looking for ready-made solutions.' (page 235 of Thompson, N. (2002) *People Skills*, Palgrave Macmillan)

Reflective practice (Schon 1990)ⁱⁱ is, in essence, the working through of the Kolb cycle (action, reflection, analysis and planning) on a continuous basis, so that, for example, you:

- Learn from experience' by recording events, reflecting on them, working out why things happened the way they did and planning how to build on successes and minimise weaknesses.
- Assess the relevance of theory to practice by planning interventions based on theory, then monitoring and analysing the results.

Reflective practice is not about navel gazing but it is a key aspect of professional practice. Reflective practitioners have the ability to take a step back from their immediate practice in order to take a broader, more analytical view of the situation.

Mezirow (1990)ⁱⁱⁱ stresses the importance of critical reflection in adult education:

"Perhaps even more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances. This is a crucial learning process egregiously ignored by learning theorists." (1990:5)

He suggests three main concepts of reflection:

- **Affective reflectivity:** becoming aware of how we feel about the way we are observing and understanding, thinking or acting, or about our habits of doing so.
- **Discriminant reflectivity:** where we assess how effective are our perceptions, thoughts, actions and habits of doing things.
- **Judgemental reflectivity:** where we become aware and make value judgments about our perceptions, thoughts, actions and habits in terms of their being liked or disliked, beautiful or ugly, positive or negative.

There are many advantages of consciously learning from experience, and of expecting to learn from both future and past experiences. For example:

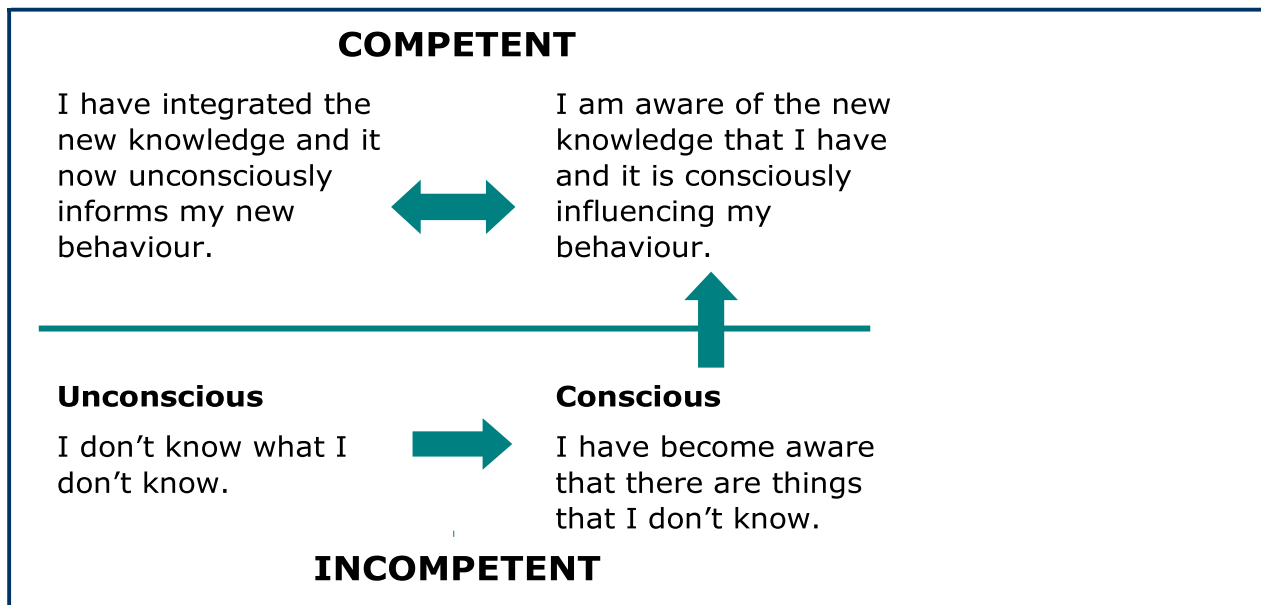
- It helps you to learn from your successes, not just from your mistakes.
- It makes it more likely that you will transfer your learning.
- It can help you to plan for future similar situations: to plan what you will do the same, what you will do differently.

Reflecting on your performance and identifying gaps in your knowledge and understanding can feel deskilling, particularly at the outset of a new career or training programme.

The following diagram provides a helpful model for the development of competent reflective practice. Can you place yourself and your work somewhere in this model?

Activity 1

Conscious Competence.



In *People Skills*, (2002: 238), Neil Thompson outlines a six-step approach to developing yourself as a reflective practitioner:

- 1. Read.** Reading is not just for students! Reading enhances practice and increases work satisfaction by providing a wider perspective on key issues and debates.
- 2. Ask.** Ask questions about your reading and question colleagues about their practice.
- 3. Watch.** Do not practice in a routine and uncritical way. Every situation is different so refine your observational skills.
- 4. Feel.** The 'feeling' dimension of work with people is important too. Recognising feelings can bring theory to life.
- 5. Talk.** Talking with colleagues shares knowledge and helps us to learn from the experience of others. Talking can help create an open and supportive working environment.
- 6. Think.** Thinking is an essential part of good practice. It should not be abandoned when the task is familiar or when working life is busy.

Reflective questions can be a useful way of developing the skills of reflective practice and evaluating the outcome of your work. They are generally the what, why, which, when, where and how questions, for example:

- What did I set out to achieve?
- What did I achieve?
- Why did I succeed (or fail?) in achieving my objectives?
- What could I have done differently?
- What have I learned?
- How could my practice have been improved?
- How might my practice have been less oppressive?
- How did the offender respond to my style of working?
- Where in the interview could I have done things differently?
- When was it most appropriate to challenge?
- How do I ensure I challenge constructively?

There are some problems with encouraging a reflective approach to practice:

- It requires self-discipline.
- It is easy to skip, to conclude 'that will do', particularly when feeling demotivated or passive.
- It requires a high level of self-confidence to analyse your own behaviour.
- You sometimes just do not know what you are looking for, what you are reflecting on.
- It can make you feel unhappy, uncomfortable about the situation you have just been in, and subsequently discourage you from reflecting the next time.
- It is hard to reflect when you are being criticised – you are too busy defending yourself.
- It is easy to lapse when something more important turns up.
- It is hard to complete when things are going well.
- It will stop if you cannot see the benefits.
- It is boring when nothing exciting or momentous has happened.

- It is hard when you have no support, or are feeling alone/ threatened.
- It can't just be thought about, it must be written down.
- It is hard to pick up once put down.
- It is difficult to distinguish between facts and assumptions.
- It can be difficult to identify how your feelings and thoughts relate to your actions and vice versa.

Despite all these problems, we believe that learning by reflection converts informal and accidental opportunities into more efficient learning opportunities, and encourages planning for future opportunities. We encourage adult learners to go through the stages of reflection so that they can make judgments about their own behaviours and perceptions?

