2.07 Developing skills of reflection

Developing Skills of Reflection

Many courses and programmes of study in higher education require the reflective integration of learning which is derived from experience or practice. This is especially true of courses that lead to both academic awards and a professional qualification such as nursing, teaching, social work or some areas of legal practice and criminal justice. In some of these, for example, social work, reflecting on practice and integration of theory and practice is a formal requirement for the professional qualification. Even where this is not the case, reflection as a general skill can form part of the learning process and the ability to use this will enhance the quality of your learning. This section gives you some pointers to developing and using skills of reflection.

First, what is to be gained by reflection?

Reflection goes beyond just gaining knowledge, to

- exploring the foundations of that knowledge,
- strengthening understanding, and
- increasing awareness of the values and attitudes that influence it.

It is important to remember that reflection is a dynamic process. It is not about being passive, staying where you are and looking back, (although time to be still may be an important part of it) but an active engagement with knowledge and experience. So, by reflecting, you are able to construct new and deeper understanding and to articulate knowledge in a more meaningful way.

The process of reflection will often mean that theoretical learning is challenged by reality of experience, where such things as diversity, value, resource constraints and conflicts pose questions and dilemmas. Reflection may not always give you easy answers, but it will help you take those tensions seriously. This is especially important for professional practitioners as it enables them to begin to make sense of practice experience without ignoring the fact that there are always, beneath the practice, values, assumptions, beliefs and personal perspectives that influence both the practice itself and the way that practice is experienced.

The Reflective Process

One of the most commonly quoted models for understanding the process of reflection is a model developed by Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985). This model highlights that experiences in learning combine behaviour, ideas and feelings and all of these aspects need to be examined in the process of reflection.

The process has three stages:

- **returning to experience** - a detailed recounting or recollection of the events
- **attending to the feelings**, both positive and negative, that have been prompted by the experience
- **re-evaluating that experience** in the light of these stages and the learner's intent, and self-knowledge, bringing in new knowledge that has been gained through the process.

Possible Barriers to Reflection

There are a number of things that can get in the way of reflection - these have messages for both students and teachers. Some of them may be external to the learner, (people, environment, wider personal circumstances, social forces, including issues that might be associated with experiences of discrimination and oppression) and some may be internal (these might include previous negative experiences, assumptions about ability or lack of it, confidence and self-awareness).

Such barriers might be:

- assumptions about what is/is not possible
- assumptions about how to learn
- confidence/self confidence
- previous (negative) experiences
- expectations of others - expectations of self
- inadequate preparation
- environment
- lack of space/time
- tiredness
- unclear/ambivalent intent - do you really want to do this?

It is important not just to be aware of potential barriers but to acknowledge them and to work with them. It is likely that barriers and potential barriers will vary between individuals and between different situations and it may not always be possible to change some of them, but failing to acknowledge them and to own them is bound to limit the reflection processes within the experience and diminish the potential for learning. Working to reduce the potential barriers to learning is the responsibility of both students and teachers and it is worth taking time just to think about what your own barriers or possible barriers might be and what you can do, or ask others to do to minimise them.

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What are the skills and qualities needed to be reflective?

Reflection requires an approach which is

- **tolerant of diversity of ideas** - not everyone will think the way you do, not everyone interprets or understands the world in the way you do

- **curious** - there has to be a willingness to ask questions, to want to find out

- **patient** (not jumping to conclusions) - just as there are no simple answers, there are no instant answers either and your ideas and understanding may well change over time

- **open** - to absorb what is happening

- **honest** - you need to be honest with yourself and this includes being honest about doubts and uncertainty or lack of knowledge. Learning can't take place if you pretend to know what you don't understand.

Strategies for reflection

Some useful strategies that may be used in developing skills for reflection include:

Use of learning logs

A learning log can be a valuable tool. Different courses may provide different formats for learning logs, but the type of questions you can ask are:

Event/activity - e.g. what happened?, what was the sequence of events?, what role did I play?, what tasks did I perform?

Reflection/analysis - what have I learned from this experience/activity?, what issues or questions did it raise for me?, what positive and negative feelings did it evoke?

Underpinning knowledge and understanding - what knowledge/theory helps me to understand this event/activity?, what source materials are useful to this?

Issues for future development and learning - what else do I need to know to increase my understanding?, how can my knowledge /practice be improved?, are there any unresolved issues?

Key message - what is the main message that comes from this reflection?

Used well, learning logs can be a rich source of learning and evidence of learning.

Debriefing with colleagues or learning partner

Simply talking over events and feelings can be a valuable part of a learning process. If your reflection involves talking about work with people you may need to be careful about issues of confidentiality and boundaries.

Focus on specific incidents (critical incident analysis, process record)

There is a value in writing down in detail not just what happened, but the how, why, what, when of the process including thoughts and feelings. It can seem a laborious task, but usually worth the effort.

Work placement supervision

In a situation where reflection is part of practice learning, supervision by another (for example a practice teacher) is an opportunity for reflection and learning and used well is one where both student and teacher experience learning.

Action research

This is particularly relevant where learning is coming from practice experience. Research and evaluation of practice and as part of practice, will enhance understanding and can improve practice. Use the opportunity to find out (research) about the work you are doing. How is its effectiveness measured? From whose perspective? What evidence is there for that? How far are goals and objectives being achieved? What are the implications for re-assessment and change?

How then, do you begin to reflect on your learning?

First, prepare yourself and focus your thoughts:

- think about yourself
- what are your aims as a learner?
- why are these your aims?
- how do you view the world? (theoretical perspective)
- what values are important to you?

Then, begin to think about a specific learning situation. For example, yesterday's lecture – what impact did it have on you?, how are you going to use what you learnt?