

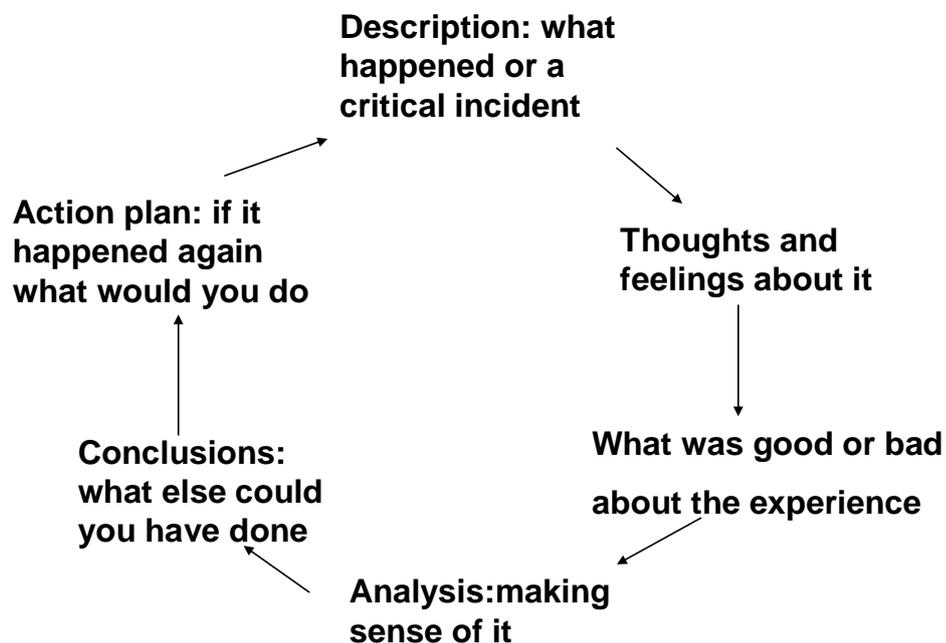


Reflective Practice

What is reflective practice?

Donald Schön (1983) suggested that the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning was one of the defining characteristics of professional practice. Reflective practice is a complex and deliberate process of thinking about an experience in order to learn from it. It is an active process of exploration and discovery in which people revisit their experiences, mulling over them, evaluating or making sense of them and most importantly learning from them. It can take place in isolation or with others. It will enable and encourage you to use a reflective process when evaluating cases and as part of your continuing professional development.

In the context of professional education the concept of reflection has a specific meaning, relating to a complex and deliberate process of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from it. This is a conscious process which does not occur automatically, but is in response to experience and with a definite purpose.





The reflective cycle

Types of reflection

Schon distinguishes between two types of reflection:

1. Reflection-on-action

This is retrospective analysis and interpretation of practice in order to uncover knowledge used and the underlying feelings in a situation. The practitioner may speculate on how the situation might have been handled differently and how other knowledge would have been helpful. Reflection-on-action occurs after the event and therefore contributes to the continuing development of professional practice. This way of reflecting is useful after case taking and differentiating remedies. Supervision plays a key role here.

2. Reflection-in-action

Reflection-in-action is the process whereby the practitioner recognizes a new situation or problem and thinks about it while still acting. Although the issues may not be exactly the same as in previous occasions, the practitioner is able to draw from past experiences, when deciding how to solve or manage a problem in practice. Reflection-in-action has the potential for promoting skilled and flexible responses of an experienced practitioner.

Stages of the reflective Process

1. **Problem identification.** This is often triggered by an **awareness of uncomfortable feelings** or thoughts, or a sense of inner discomfort, doubt or perplexity. The need to reflect may arise from a loss of confidence in oneself or a disillusionment of the existing situation. **Problem identification can be difficult** since problems are often seen as indicators of incompetence and as individuals we create defenses preventing problem recognition.

However this stage can also be prompted by positive states, such as an important achievement. Analysis of what worked well will guide future responses.

2. **Critical analysis** of the situation, which is constructive and includes observation of feelings and an examination of knowledge of how the situation has affected us and how we have affected the event.
3. **Perspective transformation'** Analysis leads to the development of a new perspective or clarification of an issue. It could also lead to the development of new ideas, even a new attitude or way of thinking. Thus the outcome of reflection is learning or 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow)
4. **Action plan or implementation of new knowledge.** Reflection needs to be followed by action, either a changed outlook or a new way of responding to situations or learning a new skill. Thought without action is not reflective practice!

Enhancing Reflective Skills

The capacity to reflect is developed to different levels in different people. Certain attitudes and qualities are necessary to learn through reflection. Developing skills for reflection, and using reflection in learning takes time and energy. **Motivation and commitment are essential as is open-mindedness in order to enable each of us to recognize personal biases and to be receptive to new ideas.**



Skills required to engage in reflection have been identified as :

- **Self-awareness**
- **Description**
- **Critical analysis**
- **Synthesis and evaluation**

Self awareness is knowing ourselves, that is being conscious of our personality, beliefs and values, feelings, qualities, abilities and limitations. The way we perceive an event and respond to it, is conditioned by our past experiences, our culture, environment and circumstances. Thus self-awareness enables us to recognize that our feelings and emotions colour our view of the world and may affect others.

- **Our emotional reactions to a patient's story, either empathetic or in aversion, can become barriers to our impartiality and can over ride our rationality.**
- **We can be judgemental, based on our own principles and practices**
- **We may harbour cultural prejudices, either consciously or unconsciously.**
- **So we need to be aware of how and why our assumptions about the world distorts or limits the way we see ourselves and our relationships with our patients.**

Description is the vital starting point to begin reflection. We need to be able to describe accurately thoughts and feelings both verbally and in writing. Good description paints a complete picture, capturing the essence of a case or situation. It should include the following key elements:

- Significant background factors
- The events as they unfolded
- What were your thoughts and feelings at that time

It is important **not** to make judgements at this stage.

Critical analysis involves:

Examining the components of the situation/case

Identifying and scrutinizing existing knowledge and its relevance to the situation/case

Exploring the feelings you have or had about the case. Focusing on the positive feelings and removing obstructive feelings so a rational evaluation of the case can be made.

Challenging any assumptions you've made

Imagining and exploring alternative knowledge and actions

Synthesis is the integration of new knowledge into the analysis of the case. It is a particularly important skill if the outcome of reflection is to be a changed conceptual perspective.

Evaluation enables you to re-examine the case in the light of the new knowledge gained as a result of reflection and to make a judgement about the value of the knowledge you have achieved.



Outcomes of reflection

- Greater awareness of self
- Understanding one's own learning style and needs
- A new way of thinking or doing something
- Clarification of an issue or
- Resolution of a problem
- Development of a skill
- Greater confidence and assertiveness

Summary

Reflective practice facilitates learning by creating opportunities to become more aware of our practice and fosters a critical assessment using our own experiences to address problems. As we ask questions and challenge ideas, our awareness of ourselves develops and our understanding deepens. This enables us to become more perceptive in case-taking, facilitating us in our quest to become 'un-prejudiced observers' and leading to better case analysis. Reflection is a personal process and the outcome is a changed perspective, followed by action. It is not the same as thoughtful action, since it involves a pause to reassess our performance by asking, "**what am I doing wrong? Or what am I not seeing?**"

The objective of reflection is to become a more competent practitioner.

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