

What is Reflective Practice?

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Reflection: the foundation of purposeful learning

Reflection is an active process of witnessing one's own experience in order to take a closer look at it, sometimes to direct attention to it briefly, but often to explore it in greater depth. This can be done in the midst of an activity or as an activity in itself. The key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one's own actions and experience—in other words, to examine that experience rather than just living it. By developing the ability to explore and be curious about our own experience and actions, we suddenly open up the possibilities of purposeful learning—derived not from books or experts, but from our work and our lives. This is the purpose of reflection: to allow the possibility of learning through experience, whether that is the experience of a meeting, a project, a disaster, a success, a relationship, or any other internal or external event, before, during or after it has occurred.

Certain kinds of experiences create particularly powerful opportunities for learning through reflection. *Struggles* provide a window onto what is working and not working, and may often serve as effective tools for analyzing the true nature of a challenge we are facing. Some struggles embody a *dilemma*, which can provide a rich source of information about a clash between our values and our approach to getting something done. Reflecting on experiences of *uncertainty* helps shed light on areas where an approach to our work is not fully specified. Positive experiences can also offer powerful sources of learning. For example, *breakthroughs* in action or thinking are helpful in revealing what was learned and what our theory of success looks like. Breakthroughs can also instruct on an emotional level. By locating when and why we have felt excited or fulfilled by an experience, we gain insight into the conditions that allow our creativity to flourish. Now we can become more purposeful—not just about our learning but about how to work in more creative and sustaining ways.

Practicing Reflection: how often, how much and why

Reflective practice is simply creating a habit, structure, or routine around examining experience. A practice for reflection can vary in terms of *how often*, *how much*, and *why* reflection gets done. At one end of the spectrum, a work group could go on an extended retreat after a long period and could spend a great deal of time documenting and analyzing the learning that has emerged since it last took the time to stop and deeply examine its work. At the other end, a person could reflect very frequently, bringing a high level of awareness to her thoughts and actions, but rarely stopping to look across what she has noticed to consider what could be learned by exploring her patterns of thinking across different situations.

This spectrum hints at the many diverse ways that reflective practice can be structured. Reflection can be practiced at different frequencies: every day, at long intervals of

months or years, and everything in between. Reflection can also vary in depth—from simply noticing present experience to deep examination of past events—as well as in the numerous purposes it can serve, such as examining patterns of thinking, documenting learning, realigning daily activity with deeper values, developing shared thinking, and many other objectives.

Designing a practice of reflection means both clarifying the purposes it needs to serve and identifying opportunities to locate reflection in our work that are realistic and yet occur at the right intervals and with sufficient depth to be meaningful. Maintaining a practice of reflection, however it is structured, transforms the possibility of learning from our work into a reality.

Collective vs. individual reflective practice

If reflective practice “illuminates what the self and others have experienced” (Raelin, 2002), is this an individual or collective activity? It can be either; individuals and groups alike can engage in reflective practice around their work. Whether you choose to learn from experience at the individual or on a group level depends on your learning agenda. Is an organization interested in documenting the learning embedded in its work over the past several months? If so, the experiences its members focus on and the questions they pursue in their reflection process will be about their collective practice. Is an individual needing to make sense out of a week’s worth of meetings, frustrations, and turning points in order to decide how to proceed with a project? Then she might explore her experience of the significant moments and key issues that are connected to the decision she needs to make.

Individual and collective reflection need not be sequestered from one another—in fact, they can be mutually supportive of each other inside of the same learning process. For example, in a reflection group focused on individual practice, each person takes a turn recounting a key event and getting feedback on analyzing it, naming assumptions, making connections, and formulating critical questions that emerge. In one version of an organizational learning process, each person identifies significant events from the perspective of their role, allowing the group to craft collective learning through exploring the connections across those multiple perspectives.

Each of these reflection processes is oriented differently according to the aim of the specific learning needs, yet each relies on retaining the complexity of the differences in the group. And although both processes are oriented around inquiry into experience in order to learn, each will yield different types of questions. The kinds of questions that emerge from reflection aimed at individual experience tend to relate to the development of practitioner thinking, whereas reflection oriented around collective work often yields questions connected to aligning actions with organizational values and goals.

Reflective practice is driven by questions, dialogue, and stories

Reflective practice is fundamentally structured around inquiry. We tend to recognize the importance of allocating time to reflection when we can see it as a means for gaining visibility on a problem or question we need to answer. To gain visibility, we examine

experiences that are relevant to this problem or question. The most powerful “technologies” for examining experience are *stories* (narrative accounts of experience) and *dialogue* (building thinking about experience out loud). Journaling is similar to dialogue in the case of individual reflection.

Stories and dialogue can be effective technologies for the reflective process because they provide cognitively complex and culturally potent systems for conveying the way we think about, feel about, and make connections in experience. By examining the way we have constructed a narrative account about a significant event, it suddenly becomes more possible to observe the meaning we have taken from that experience and to excavate the underlying qualities that made it significant. By engaging in collective dialogue about a story or a question, we build our understanding of it and locate the significance of that story or question in the larger context of our work. Even when there is not a clear problem or question driving reflection, it is through the exploration of stories and the practice of dialogue that we can unpack the richness of experience, and evaluate which issues emerging from that experience we need to pursue. In deeper forms of reflection, it becomes possible to identify *learning edges*, those questions or issues that an individual or group is seeking to understand in order to advance their work.

Why name reflection: why not let it just happen

In the world of work, there are enormous opportunities to learn, yet relatively few structures that support learning from experience, particularly in adulthood. Every adult reflects to some degree, and everyone, no matter their field, hypothesizes and draws conclusions from the “data” of their experience. Nevertheless, most fields of work do not provide the infrastructure of methods, practices, and processes for building knowledge from practice.

For many practitioners, doing swallows up learning. Even staying aware of what we are doing does not itself create learning. Learning is a purposeful activity, although not a complicated one. Recognizing the necessary role of reflection in excavating learning from experience and becoming familiar with the basic elements of a reflective practice will allow practitioners to begin to act on the notion that knowledge is embedded in the experience of their work, and to realize the importance of this knowledge in furthering their practice.

References

Raelin, J (2002). “I Don’t Have Time to Think!” versus the Art of Reflective Practice. In *Reflections*, vol. 4, 1, 66-79, Society for Organizational Learning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.