

Developing yourself as a leader

Reflecting about yourself as a leader

by Judy McKimm

If we are to encourage reflection in our students and trainees, then as leaders in health care education, we should ourselves engage in reflective practice. Moon defines reflective practice as “a set of abilities and skills, to indicate the taking of a critical stance, an orientation to problem solving or state of mind” (Moon, 1999:63). In reality, all practitioners engage in reflection about their professional work, however **reflective practice** is an intentional event that takes both time and commitment (Driscoll and Teh, 2001). 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.

Why is it important to reflect?

Schön (1983) considers two kinds of knowledge that professionals use in practice: ‘technical rationality’ and ‘tacit knowledge’. Technical rationality is where we apply the theory we have learned to solve practical day-to-day problems. This often fails to help us in the ‘swampy lowland’ of professional practice where situations are not as they were described in the textbooks and uncertainty and personal conflict may prevail. In these settings, tacit or intuitive knowledge is employed. Exposing the swampy lowlands of professional practice through reflection might help us to make sense of these complex and ambiguous situations.

Chris Johns (cited in Driscoll and Teh, 2001) discussing the place of reflective practice in nursing suggests that:

“reflection is a window through which the practitioner can view and focus self within the context of her own lived experience in ways that help her confront, understand and work towards resolving the contradictions within her practice between what is desirable and actual practice. Through the conflict of contradiction, the commitment to realise desirable work and understanding why things are as they are, the practitioner is empowered to take more appropriate action in future situations”.

In her book on reflective practice, Gilly Bolton reminds us to ‘mind the gap’. Like Schön’s ‘swampy lowland’, “the gap may be an uncomfortable situation where we don’t know the answers...(but which)...can lead to reflective questions being asked, such as a deep and thorough examination of just what made something so spectacularly right, or what went wrong in a given disaster” (2002). Bolton summarises the advantages of reflective practice as enabling us to:

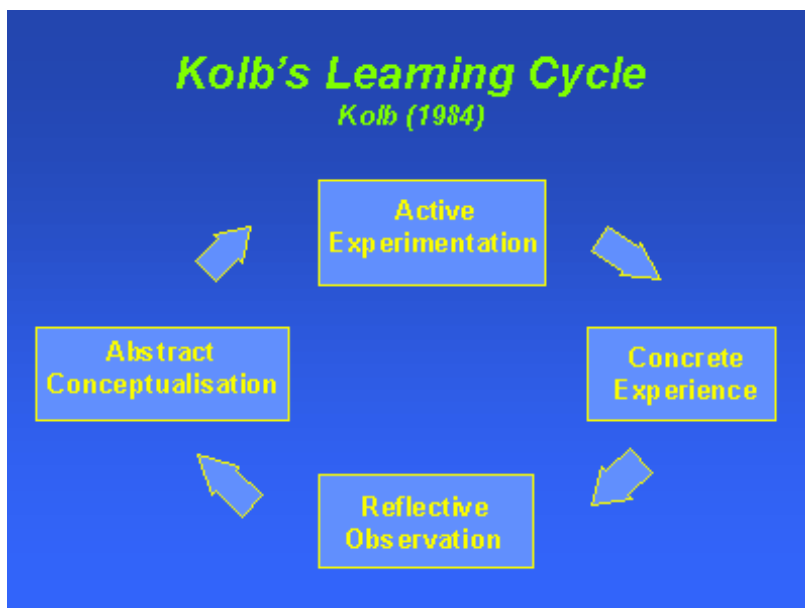
- Study our own decision-making processes
- Be constructively critical of our relationship with colleagues
- Analyse hesitations and skill and knowledge gaps
- Face problematic and painful episodes
- Identify learning needs

It is often easy for health professionals, academics and teachers to work in professional isolation. In the absence of contact with other professionals, reflection is a way that we

can make sense of experiences we have had, either with students or other learners, patients or colleagues. When we reflect, we begin to tease out the details of an experience, what it tells us about our own skills, why it happened perhaps, what we did well and a plan for what we might do differently in future.

Models for practical reflection

Kolb (1984) was also influential in describing how learning takes place. His 'learning cycle, see below, approaches the idea of learning as **experiential** (learning by doing). Experiential learning is highly relevant to learning in medicine and healthcare and Kolb suggests that ideas are not fixed, but are formed and modified through the experiences we have and by our past experience. These concepts underpin prevailing ideas in healthcare and other professional education and training such as the 'reflective practitioner' and the shift from 'novice to expert'.



The four elements can be summarised as **DO, REVIEW, LEARN** and **APPLY**. Kolb argued that the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points and that learning should occur in a continuous 'loop'. However, the learning process is often stimulated in practice by a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of that action in this situation. Crucial to learning is the next step of reflection and observation. Without reflecting on our experiences we cannot make progress through the cycle and will therefore not learn effectively. An example of the experiential learning cycle in action would be:

- 1 **Concrete experience - DO** something, this might be a critical incident or something that happens on a day-to-day basis
- 2 **Reflection and observation – REVIEW** and think about why this happens as it does and what others do in similar situations
- 3 **Abstract conceptualisation - LEARN** from what happens, internalise it and decide to change your behaviour or actions
- 4 **Active experimentation - APPLY** the learning and your ideas to different situations and context , then the whole cycle begins again.....

How do I do it?

There are no hard and fast rules for reflection, however writing tends to be a more powerful way of reflecting than merely thinking about an experience. Producing written documentation helps us to construct a more in-depth analysis, can act as a useful aide-memoire, may be required as part of an appraisal or revalidation process and is a useful way to record your own progress.

Some people keep a reflective diary or learning log, others express themselves in story or poetry. The important thing to remember is that you are reflecting for your own development and therefore your method need only be meaningful to you. Using a framework or scaffold can be useful when you first start to write reflectively

One suggested framework is developed from the work of John Smyth. Smyth, writing about developing 'socially critical educators' in Boud and Miller (1996) suggests that when reflecting on practice, teachers should engage in four actions, linked to four questions. These questions are in some ways similar to Kolb's 'learning cycle' but look at this in a slightly different way linked to practice. These are also appropriate for thinking about situations involving leadership.

Describe...what do I do?

This involves describing concrete events or situations, possibly in a journal or reflective diary which can be used in the portfolio as part of a reflective approach to your own leadership development. You can note down useful ideas, describe some 'critical incidents', complete the activities and exercises and develop a record which can be used as part of your CPD.

Inform....what does this mean?

This is where you take the description of the events or situations and start to analyse it in order to uncover what this means and to identify the underlying principles of what it is that you are doing.

Confront....how did I come to be like this?

This stage goes deeper and starts to question some of the assumptions we make as leaders, making critical reflection about the assumptions that underlie management methods and organisational practices. A series of guiding questions for this stage might be:

- "What does my day to day practice say about my assumptions, values and beliefs about education?
- Where did these ideas come from?
- What social practices are expressed in these ideas?
- What is it that causes me to maintain my theories?
- What views of power do they embody?
- Whose interests seem to be served by my practices?
- What is that constrains my views of what is possible?"

(Smyth, in Boud and Miller (1996) p. 53)

Reconstruct....how might I do things differently?

This stage involves taking an active reflective stance about your own role as a leader and incorporating 'learning about leading'.

Another framework might be less based on free form writing, as follows:

<p>Description – what is the stimulus for reflection (eg. incident, event, theoretical idea) and what are you going to reflect on?</p>	<p><i>eg. I noticed that at the senior management meeting the principal dominated the conversations and wouldn't let more junior staff say anything</i></p>
<p>Feelings – What were your reactions and feelings, both at the time and afterwards</p>	<p><i>I felt sidelined, frustrated and ignored as if my views were worthless. Afterwards I felt angry with myself for not being more forceful</i></p>
<p>Evaluation – what was good and bad about the experience? Make value judgements</p>	<p><i>It made me think that I wouldn't be like that when/if I am in a very senior position, I lost some respect for the principal and his management style</i></p>
<p>Analysis – What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from your own experience, from theory, from the experience of others to help explain what was really going on</p>	<p><i>Talking to other colleagues made me see that I wasn't alone, but it was interesting to hear that some weren't bothered as long as the work got done effectively. This relates to some of the reading I have been doing on leadership and management styles and organisational behaviour</i></p>
<p>Conclusions – What can be concluded about your own specific, unique personal situation or style of working</p>	<p><i>I prefer a more consultative and participative style of management, I like to feel valued and part of a team</i></p>
<p>Personal action plan – what are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time? What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learned?</p>	<p><i>I am going to try to be more assertive in meetings. I am going to seek out ways of working with others in a more participative way eg. working parties rather than committees....</i></p>