

Reflective Practice and Writing: a Guide to Getting Started

Author biographical details

Narelle Hampe is a Librarian at the University of Newcastle's Ourimbah Campus Library, her current role is Student Liaison Librarian within the Central Coast Local Health District Libraries. She is a recent graduate of the Master of Arts in Information and Knowledge Management from the University of Technology, Sydney. Her professional interests include information literacy and staff development, including succession planning.

What is reflective practice?

Reflection is an integral component of continuing professional development (CPD) and a requirement of the ALIA PD scheme. Reflective practice is not however, an intrinsic skill and many library and information science (LIS) professionals are not confident about undertaking reflection. The following is an overview of literature in the field, and some practical suggestions, to assist LIS practitioners in getting started with reflective practice.

Reflective practice is simply any instance where an individual thinks critically about an action, thought, or experience. This thinking then enables the increase of their self-awareness and professional competence (Epstein and Hundert 2002; Levine, Kern and Wright, 2008). It is a purely personal response to situations, events, experiences, or new information. Reflective practice critically examines not only the what, but also the why (The Learning Centre UNSW, 2008). Since the 1980s, the development and advancement of reflective skills have been widely adopted in a range of higher education and professional settings including the health sciences, education, and management.

Influences, Enablers and Barriers

Many factors will impact on your reflections. Different backgrounds – culture, education, family, work; different career and study goals; different levels of interest and motivation will all influence how you reflect (Brodie, 2008).

The literature commonly refers to the following as being the qualities, skills and attitudes required for reflective practice (Atkins & Murphy, 1993; Atkins & Murphy, 1994): self-awareness; the ability to describe; the ability to critically analyse events or experiences using logical thinking; the ability to synthesise and evaluate learning, events or experiences; honesty and trust; insight; time; motivation; and practice. The skills of deep reflection take time and dedication to develop. At different times in our professional lives we may encounter barriers and challenges to our commitment to reflective practice (Flinders University, n.d). These may include: time; motivation and commitment; confidentiality and trust; individual differences and styles; and skill development and growth.

Types of Reflection

Donald Schon (1973; 1983; 1987) described *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action*. Killion & Todnem (1991) highlighted *reflection-for-action*. These three reflective directions form a continuous cycle of reflective practice.

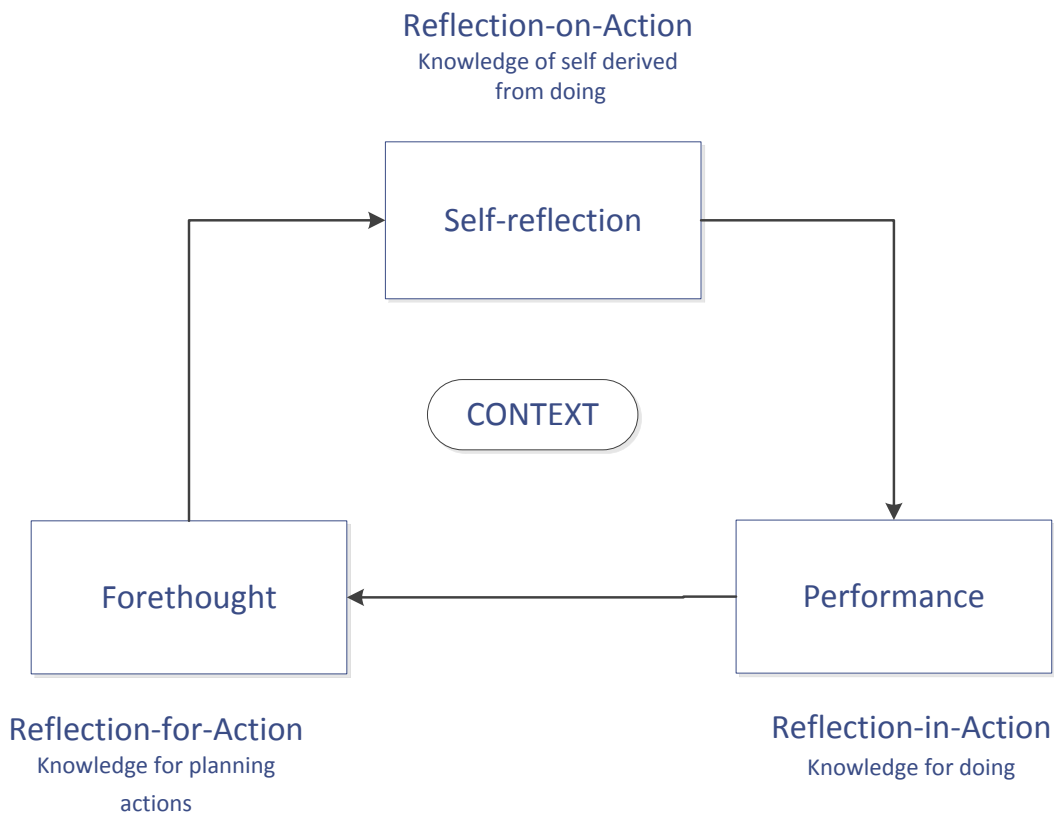


Figure 1 -The Reflective Practice Cycle

Reflection-on-action requires looking back on what one has accomplished and reviewing the actions, thoughts, and final product. In *reflection-in-action*, the individual reflects while carrying out a task. *Reflection-for-action*, knowledge for planning ahead, requires the participant to review what has been accomplished and identify constructive guidelines to follow to succeed in the given task in the future.

Getting Started

Reflection requires routines and habits that can be learned and practiced (Loughran, 2002). Reflective writing is evidence of reflective thinking. Learning to write reflectively should equip you with relevant ethical and analytical abilities, which in turn will enable you to benefit from your personal, professional and practical experiences (Howatson-Jones, 2010). Reflective writing is most often subjective since it concerns your thoughts and emotions. In addition to being reflective and logical, it is therefore feasible to be personal, hypothetical, critical and creative. There is no right or wrong way to reflect, however the deeper the level of reflection attained the more beneficial it will be.

Try this practical exercise. Think of an activity, interaction or event you have experienced that can be connected to work practices and ask yourself the following questions: what happened? What was your role? What feelings and perceptions surrounded the experience? How would you explain the situation to someone else? What might this experience mean in the context of your workplace? What other perspectives, theories or concepts could be applied to the situation? As well as personal reflection, you may want to use other methods of reflection including feedback, keeping a journal or portfolio, and goal setting. Having made connections, identified patterns and made sense of past reflections, you are more

likely to be able to plan and implement changes for the future. (The Learning Centre UNSW, 2008)

Models of Reflection

There are many models of reflection to be found in the literature. While the structure and format of these models may vary, they share common features. The purpose of these models is to provide a basis for doing reflective thinking. In many ways they act as a form of structured debriefing for a situation, activity or event, which critically examines not only what happened but why.

These models vary in complexity but Driscoll's (1994) model, based on Kolb's (1984) cycle of action and reflection, is just three questions, **What?** Describe the experience – what did you do? **So what?** Describe what difference it makes, what impact or meaning it has for you and why it is important; and **Now what?** What are you going to do to continue your professional development in light of this learning.

Vocabulary aid

The following are just a few suggestions for words and phrases that might be useful for prompting reflective writing (adapted from Hampton, 2010).

For me, the [most]	}	important meaningful significant relevant useful	{	event(s) aspect(s) idea(s) experience(s) issue(s) activities	{	was (were)
			{	learning	{	happened when... resulted from... arose from... began after... became relevant for...

I have	{	developed improved enriched upgraded	{	My understanding of... my knowledge of... my ability to... my skills in...
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Having	{	analysed... applied... discussed... experienced... learned... read...	I now	{	feel... know... question... realise... think... wonder...
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This knowledge This understanding This skill	{	is could be will be	{	essential important useful	{	to me in the workplace because...
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Because I	{	did not ... have not yet... am not yet certain about... am not yet confident with... do not yet know... do not yet understand...	{	I will now need to...
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Previously, Initially, Subsequently, Later,	{	I	{	thought (did not think)... felt (did not feel)... noticed (did not notice)... questioned (did not question)... realised (did not realise)...
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Alternatively, Equally,	this	{	might be is perhaps could be is probably	{	because of... due to... explained by... related to...
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Conclusion

Reflective practice and reflective writing require time, commitment, honesty and practice. Above all, it is important to retain a positive approach. When reflecting on difficult

situations or experiences, ask yourself 'What have I learnt today?' This is a positive approach to processing information, and can be a constructive way of dealing with an event that may have been upsetting (Brodie, 2008). It is also important to view experiences objectively. According to Somerville & Keeling (2004) being a participant observer of your own experiences can enable you to process the underlying elements of personal interactions. Above all, value your personal strengths. The literature on reflection often focuses on identifying weaknesses and using reflection to address these weaknesses (Grant and Greene, 2001; Revans, 1998). While it is important to look at ways of improving our effectiveness, we should not ignore our strengths or accomplishments (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001).

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