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## The Power and Practice of Reflection

If you ask someone to define reflection, you are liable to receive widely varied responses. In the simplest form, mention may be made of stopping to think, a momentary pause in the activities tied to living for example, stopping briefly to reflect on what is needed as one enters a grocery store. When it comes to reflecting on your life and critical decisions that need to be made, it becomes much more difficult.<sup>1</sup>

Plato said, "The first and best victory is to conquer self. To be conquered by self is, of all things, the most shameful and vile".

Reflection, especially critical reflection, requires deep connection with the inner self. This can be difficult to achieve after long periods of blockage caused by the repetitiveness and intensity of daily events. To achieve connection with your deeper self requires a quietness of mind, self-honesty, and at least brief escapes from what can be the unsystematic clutter of our lives. It can only be brought about by practice and a sincere desire to know ourselves and our potentialities.

For some, stopping to reflect on their existence can seem too painful. It can bring to mind memories of failure or life tragedies. In short, one can be afraid of what (s)he may see if one takes a long, hard look at one's self. Protection of self-image and self-esteem require that one stay clear of certain sensitive subjects.

While there can be obvious psychological blockages to reflection, the more common reasons for finding it difficult to reflect are much more basic. First, opportunities to reflect are driven out by the frenzy of life activity and day in and day out crises. Therefore, the ability to reflect lies undeveloped, and when one attempts it, reflection can seem extremely awkward--like a right-handed person trying to sign their name using their left hand. Additionally, an almost fundamental belief in our American culture is that stillness equals laziness. Dennis Sparks, Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, reminds us that silence is a powerful learning tool. It enables us to create a sense of spaciousness in which our most important thinking may freely emerge. School leaders, as business executives, can be especially resistant to reflection

because it can seem a needless detour from current business activity.

It takes time and practice to unlock the ability to reflect. The art of critical reflection takes even longer, and many never get there. However, once the impasse is breached and reflection starts to occur naturally and routinely, the individual can feel empowered and in control of his/her own life. This can be a liberating and empowering experience. When the reflection pushes to the deeper levels of self, it becomes possible to jettison dysfunctional assumptions and behaviors. This is where and when **deep learning** can then occur. It can become **transformative** learning. The individual is elevated to a new plateau of self-awareness. At this point, it becomes what can be called emancipatory learning--throwing off the self-imposed, and frequently externally imposed, chains that have been constraining clear thinking and advance.<sup>2</sup>

Reflection in the end is a **dialogue with self**. It can lead to a form of self-catharsis, where we find ourselves listening to our inner feelings. One may be surprised to find him/herself good company and that one can engage in meaningful conversations with self as part of the act of reflecting.



## Why Become a Reflective Educator?

John Dewey maintained that reflection is an important aspect of learning from experience. He wrote that reflective thinking leads educators to act in a "deliberate and intentional fashion" rather than in a "blind and impulsive" manner.<sup>3</sup>

Dewey stressed the importance of reflecting on practices and integrating observations into emerging theories of teaching and learning. He believed that this helps educators become both the producers and consumers of knowledge about educational practices. Reflective practitioners use the knowledge they gain through continual inquiry and analysis to refine instruction.<sup>4</sup>

Educators must continually study their practices if they are to grow. They need to concentrate on developing those practices that help them deliver their best work.



## Principles That Guide Successful Reflection

There is no one way to induce reflection in those who are not accustomed to reflection. It is best to employ multiple strategies undergirded by these principles:

1. Reflection requires deliberation, a purposeful slowing down to find time for a close look and the conscious processing of thoughts.
2. Reflection requires a willingness to be open to other points of view as well as to new insights and understandings.
3. Reflection is most effective when it is done before, during, and after a professional learning experience.
4. Utilizing a wide variety of reflection strategies is the most effective way of engaging all the learning from a particular experience.
5. Post learning reflection needs to happen as soon after the learning experience as possible.
6. Insights gained via reflection should be reexamined a week, month, semester, and year later.
7. To say that you have engaged in reflection requires the additional step of taking action with what has been learned.

## Strategies to Try

**Learning Log or Journal:** The maintenance of a learning log can be helpful. However, it requires disciplined attention. A common question is "What should be included?" It is certainly not a "Dear Diary" type process. One of the obstacles to getting into the flow of reflecting on what is happening is the sense of awkwardness people can feel in keeping such a log. They haven't yet found themselves to a deeper level of reflection. Therefore, it can become relegated to making entries that only outline what occurred, but without any underlying reflection on why it may be important, or what else it may suggest.

One way to overcome the initial impasse in getting started is to ask the set members to use a Critical Incident related approach to determining what they need to record. Here are some possible questions to ask, to which the individual can add his or her own.

- a. When did I feel most engaged?
- b. When did I feel most distanced?
- c. When did I feel most puzzled?
- d. When did I feel most affirmed?

e. What gaps in my learning did I discover, and how should I go about closing/narrowing them?

A question can arise about when you should make entries in the log. One ideal time is following a meeting of the action learning set, but there can be other times as well. You process information between set meetings, especially when you are pursuing a difficult project to conclusion. You should make entries in your log as the spirit moves you.

Once the opening awkwardness and unfamiliarity of keeping such a log is overcome, the process can become a natural part of one's existence. This becomes true as reflection becomes more natural. To most people reflection can seem unnatural. Who has time to reflect on what is happening when they are caught up in daily events? As one becomes comfortable with reflection, they can find that they are living happier lives and are much more aware of how they need to shape their existence. They see opportunities that they did not know existed before. In some cases, it can result in

## Strategies to Try, Continued

a major life change. The person can also begin to see opportunities to change the organizations they are associated with.

What the learning log gives you is a record of reflection on action as events or key milestones take place. What can then turn such information into something of greater value is when you later, or at regular intervals, reflect on reflection-in-action, namely looking for patterns and drawing connections between what has occurred. Have your personal views shifted as a result of the pattern of events you see? What is the significance when you examine longitudinally what has occurred? One effective way to generate the reflection on reflection-in-action is to challenge yourself to write a personal essay, a stream of consciousness, on what the entries in the learning log seem to convey, and how you can best interpret your findings and apply them.<sup>5</sup>

### Kinds of Journals

1. *Personal Journal* – Learners write freely about their experience. This is usually done weekly. These personal journals may be submitted periodically for review by a principal, school-based professional developer, or some other individual or they may be kept as a reference to use at the end of the experience when putting together an academic essay reflecting their experience.
2. *Dialogue Journal* – Learners submit loose-leaf pages from a dialogue journal bi-weekly (or otherwise at appropriate intervals) for the professional development leader or principal to read and comment on. While labor intensive, this method can provide continual feedback to learners and prompt new questions for consideration and continued growth.
3. *Highlighted Journal* – Before learners submit the reflective journal, they reread personal entries and, using a highlighter, mark sections of the journal that directly relate to concepts discussed in the text, during the learning experience, or that they have begun to apply. This practice makes it easier for the professional developer or principal to provide specific feedback of relevance to the learner.
4. *Key Phrase Journal* – In this type of journal, learners integrate terms and key phrases within their journal entries. The professional developer can provide a list of terms during the learning experience or from recommended readings. Learners might also create their own list of key phrases to include. Journal entries are written within the framework of the face-to-face learning and become an observation of how learning content is evident in the actual application experience.
5. *Double-entry Journal* – When using a double-entry journal, learners are asked to write one-page entries each week. Learners describe personal thoughts and reactions to the application of the new learning on the left page of the journal, and write about key issues from group (e.g. grade level or content-alike teams) discussions or readings on the right page of the journal. Learners then draw arrows indicating relationships between their personal experiences and the content learned. This type of journal is a compilation of personal data and a summary of learning content in preparation of a more formal reflection perhaps as part of a summative evaluation of the professional learning experience.
6. *Critical Incident Journal* – This type of journal entry focuses the student on analysis of a particular event that occurred during the week. By answering one of the following sets of prompts, students are asked to consider their thoughts and reactions and articulate the action they plan to take in the future: Describe a significant event that occurred as a part of the service-learning experience. Why was this significant to you? What underlying issues (societal, interpersonal) surfaced as a result of this experience? How will this incident influence your future behavior? Another set of questions for a critical incident journal includes the following prompts: Describe an incident or situation that created a dilemma for you in terms of what to say or do. What is the first thing you thought of to say or do? List three other actions you might have taken. Which of the above seems best to you now and why do you think this is the best response?
7. *Three-part Journal* – Learners are asked to divide each page of their journal into thirds, and write weekly entries during a specified window of time. In the top section, learners describe some aspect of the application experience. In the middle of the page, learners are asked to analyze how learning content relates to the learning experience. Finally, an application section prompts learners to comment on how the experience and learning content can be applied to their personal or professional life.

**Internal Data Dialogue:** While applying the new learning, gather data and compile statistics or other quantitative data. Identify a job-related problem and devise a solution – both based on what the data has shown. Construct a detailed timeline and create a hypothesis.

## Strategies to Try, Continued

**Quotes:** Using quotes can be a useful way to initiate reflection because there is an ample supply of them, and they are often brief and inspiring. Consider these examples:

“If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without insight.” ---**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

“I believe that serving and being served are reciprocal and that one cannot really be one without the other.” ---**Robert Greenleaf, educator and writer**

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” ---**Margaret Mead**

“Unless you choose to do great things with it, it makes no difference how much you are rewarded, or how much power you have.” ---**Oprah Winfrey**

Quotes may be used in a variety of ways. Each learner may be provided a page of quotes and

asked to pick one that fits his/her feelings about the learning project. The learners might then be asked to explain why the chosen quote represents his/her feelings. The best results seem to be when the learners are given the sheet one session before the reflection class. This gives them time to put their thoughts together.

**Small Group/Whole School Reflection:** Because educators often work in small groups or teams, small group reflecting is an effective strategy. Setting group norms can be a powerful reflection activity for a small group. Principals are key to whole school reflection. Consider these questions:<sup>6</sup>

1. What is the purpose of this group?
2. Is there a focus for learning?
3. What are the desired outcomes?
4. How structured will the group process be to address the identified purpose?
5. How can the group become a team?
6. What evidence will the group accept to determine success?
7. What content and process reflection strategies can the group use?

## Four-Step Reflection Process

Consider four steps when engaging in reflection:<sup>7</sup>

### 1. What happened (Description)

*Key Questions:*

- a. What did I see?
- b. What did I do?
- c. What did others do?
- d. What was going on around us?

### 2. Why (Analysis, Interpretation)

*Key Questions:*

- a. What was I thinking/feeling and why?
- b. How did the context influence the experience?
- c. Are there other contributing factors? If yes, what are they?
- d. What past experiences (mine, those of others) influenced what happened or how I understood the experience?

### 3. So what? (Overall Meaning and Application)

*Key Questions:*

- a. What have I learned and what will I do with that learning?
- b. How will this learning change my thinking, behavior, interactions?
- c. What questions remain?
- d. What was the significance of this experience for me?

### 4. Now what? (Implications for Action)

*Key Questions:*

- a. With whom should I engage in reflecting or share my reflections with to make the learning even more powerful?
- b. What conditions do I need to create (or ask to be created) to increase the likelihood of productive learning?

## References

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