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Masters in professional Practice

Title: Reflective Assignment

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Introduction:

I am a state registered paramedic with the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (WAST). My current role within the organisation is Clinical Improvement Manager. I have worked for the organisation for almost 30 years, and have held several positions, including Locality Manager. I am also a Paramedic Tutor and Lecturer. This essay will reflect upon my experience of undertaking the RAL process.

What is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice has been identified as one of the key ways in which we can learn from our experiences. In education for health-care professionals it is recognised as an essential tool for helping students make the links between theory and practice. It is a key enabler to developing knowledge and skills towards becoming professional practitioners. Essentially, reflective practice means taking experiences as a starting point for learning. By thinking about them in a purposeful way, using the reflective processes, it is possible to understand them differently and take action as a result. The learning achieved by using reflective strategies is different from the theory that provides the knowledge underpinning practice. It is also different from acquiring skills by watching others and mimicking what they do, because it involves consciously thinking about things and actively making decisions. Hence, reflective practice bridges the gap between pure theory and directed practice by providing a strategy that helps to develop understanding and learning. Boyd and Fayles describe reflective practice as:

The process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, which results in a changed conceptual perspective.

(Boyd & Fayles. 1983. P.99).

Jasper explains that:

Reflective practice means taking our experiences as a starting point for learning. By thinking about them in a purposeful way- using the reflective processes- we can come to understand them differently and take action as a result.

(Jasper 2003 p.1)

Cottrell explains that:

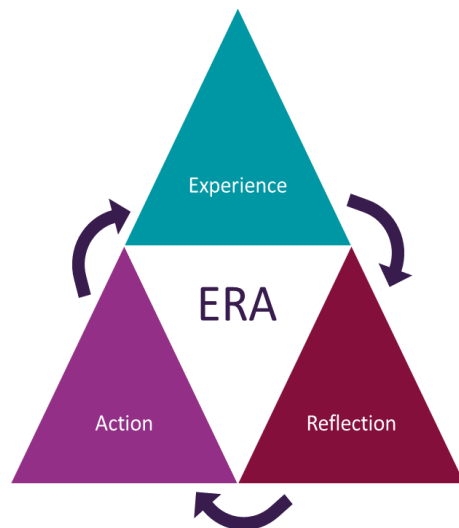
Reflection is a natural activity. To a greater or lesser extent, we all spend time going back over what we have said or done, or what we wish we had said or done. Often, reflection accompanies hindsight: we realise long after an event how things might have been different, or how some small event was more significant than we realised. This is reflected in everyday expressions:

- If only I had known, then what I know now.
- With hindsight, I now realise...
- If I had the chance, I would do it all over again.

(Cottrell, 2015, p.173)

Reflective Practice can be summarised as having three main components:

- Things (experiences) that happen to a person.
- The reflective processes that enable the person to learn from those experiences.
- The action that results from the new perspectives that are taken.



This can be summarised as Experience, Reflection, Action (ERA). This simplistic model was developed by Jasper and is based on the principles of developing enhanced knowledge based on learning from previous experiences. The key focus is on

the Action element, as this will initiate learning through reflection which will influence future practice.

There are several reflective models available that can be utilised effectively to enable



reflective practice. As a clinician, I have previously used Gibbs' model for reflection. This model developed by Gibbs in 1988 is based upon six key stages, starting with a detailed description of the event, and concluding with an action plan which provides learning

and knowledge for future practice. The structure would usually take the form of six succinct paragraphs, guiding the author through all six stages. This particular model lends itself well to clinical practice, as it draws out all events, feelings, evaluations, and conclusions, all of which lead to action plans and knowledge for future practice. Having conducted a preliminary attempt to utilise Gibbs' model for this assignment, I very quickly felt that it was far too detailed for what I was attempting to reflect upon

and was breaking it down into too many component parts. Having considered alternative reflective models such as Johns, Schon, Rolfe and Brookfield, I decided to utilise Kolb's cycle of reflective practice. Spiro et al explain that:

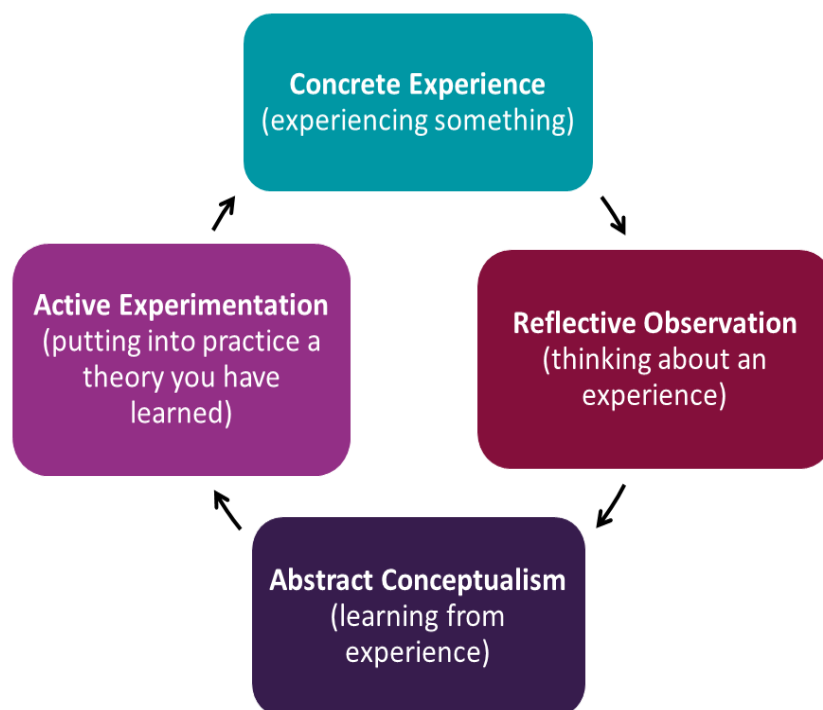
Kolb shows how reflection on an experience leads the individual to form concepts about that experience, and to be able to generalise from one experience to another. (Spiro, Williams, Wooliams 2012).

As all my previous reflections had been conducted around clinical practice, I felt that this model of reflection was much more well suited to what I was reflecting upon for this assignment. That is, although this has been an educational endeavour for me, it has also been, and been accompanied by many key experiences, which have had a profound and lasting effect on me, both personally and professionally.

The Reflective Model:

In this essay I will endeavour to reflect upon my experience of preparing a portfolio of professional evidence in respect of claiming RAL / RPEL as part of my MA in Professional Practice. For the purpose of this reflective essay, I shall utilise Kolb's Cycle of Reflective Practice, illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Kolb's Model of Reflective Practice 1984



Kolb's reflective cycle is designed to enable learning from personal experiences. The model lends itself well as the basis for developing reflective accounts or portfolios and enables the writer to take learning and knowledge from concrete experiences. The model is based around four stages. Kolb theorised that:

Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities, concrete experience abilities (CE), reflective observation abilities (RO), abstract conceptualisation abilities (AC) and active experimentation (AE)

abilities. That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE).

(Kolb, 1984 p.30).

The reflective cycle developed by Kolb is weighted heavily towards the experiences of the writer. That is that the focus of the model is to encourage the writer to appreciate the value of experiences, and their direct association with learning. The four main components of Kolb's reflective cycle are described below:

1. Concrete Experience.

By definition, this element is predicated on the writer having experienced something on which they wish to reflect. For optimum learning, it would be assumed that the writer was the person that had in fact lived the experience of which they write. Being a second or third party to the experience would remove the writer's ability to express personal feelings associated with it. This element of the cycle would usually take the form of a written account or description of the event or experience from the writer's perspective.

2. Reflective Observation.

In this the second element of the cycle, the writer is encouraged to step back, think, and reflect upon the concrete experience described, thus enabling the

experience to be properly considered. This is the element where the writer begins to reflect on action, with an emphasis on their feelings at the time. This element of the cycle allows the writer to review the events, consider the effectiveness of their actions during the experience, and begin to consider what alternative actions could have been taken, or what might be taken in future events. It is also where links are made to the knowledge and skills of the writer prior to and following the experience. This element can be a natural process for many people who have an intrinsic ability to be able to reflect. For other people, like me, a more formalised and structured approach to reflection is required if drawing learning and knowledge from the process is to be achieved.

3. Abstract Conceptualisation.

In this element, the writer is encouraged to highlight the learning gained from the reflective process by drawing inferences from their experiences and understand what they mean them. At this point, the writer is encouraged to make sense of their experiences and appreciate what effect they have within the wider world and also on personal practice. By this stage of the cycle, it is possible to acknowledge what went well within the experience and what didn't. From reflecting upon these elements, it is possible to start linking the learning from reflection to future practices. It is also an opportunity to explore learning theories and planning exercises to plan how you would do things differently, should the same or a similar event occur in the future.

4. Active Experimentation.

The final stage is where the writer is encouraged to identify any learning points and incorporate them into future plans or practice. This is where learning from

reflection can be transferred into future plans, thus testing out the new found knowledge and working practices in real life situations. These plans can be actioned in new experiences which can also be reflected upon, thus returning to the first element of the cycle. It is important that new learning is actually acted upon in future experiences, and not just considered or suggested as part of a written account. Failing to act upon the learning risks new learning not being embedded into future practice.

The design of Kolb's model is such that the user is required to work through each of the stages thoroughly before returning back to the start. Spiro et al state that:

Kolb shows how reflection on an experience leads the individual to form concepts about that experience, and to be able to generalise from one experience to another. (Spiro, Williams, Wooliams 2012).

The emphasis is on reflective observation utilised as a method of analysing experiences and deriving conclusions from therein. Learning can then be carried forward into new experiences, which completes the reflective cycle. The cycle can then be re-utilised to inform further learning or started again for new experiences to be reflected upon. The emphasis is on reflective observation as a way of making sense and drawing logical conclusions from lived experiences. The idea is that the learning achieved from using this reflective model can be transferred into new experiences, thus completing the learning / reflective cycle. The following is a reflective account of my experience developing a portfolio of evidence in relation to my studies in MA Professional Practice.

Kolb's Reflective Cycle:

1. Concrete Experience:

As part of my MA in Professional Practice, I embarked upon an RAL / RPEL assignment which focussed upon two key pieces of work I undertook as part of my professional role. Although they were two separate pieces of work, they were very closely linked in so much as they informed each other. The synergy between the two pieces of work were such that it can be described as one coherent project of work. I was in a fortunate position as I was able to use a large piece of work I was undertaking at work as the subject matter for my assignment. Although at the time I felt that this was advantageous, as time passed and I became heavily involved in other pieces of work, it became difficult to refer to previous work to inform my studies whilst also working on new initiatives as part of my day job. I found it difficult to create boundaries between the two projects I was working on. I was employing similar working practices on more than one piece of work and would often find myself confusing which piece of work I was working on, and which piece of work I was developing for my portfolio.

As I embarked on this module of learning, I was part of a cohort of people who were studying the same subject together. As our peer group dynamic developed, we had set up an online group where we would share ideas and offer support to each other. In addition to this, regular face to face contact also helped keep us all engaged and motivated. I felt confident and motivated by the energy in the group and was looking forward to the learning opportunities that awaited us as the module progressed. I looked forward to the face-to-face teaching sessions that we would attend on campus. I drew much encouragement and support from the cohort and our tutor. It

was reassuring and encouraging to share our learning successes and barriers with each other, leaving us safe in the knowledge that we were all in a similar position. I had never considered that I might one day apply to undertake a master's degree, let alone be accepted for one. At this point of my studies, I was feeling motivated, energised, and excited for the experiences that lay ahead. My ambition was that within four years I would graduate with an MA in Professional Practice with the rest of my cohort. We had often discussed what we might do for our graduation day when it arrived. Unfortunately, however, as we embarked on this module of the course, the country was hit by the Covid-19 virus outbreak and very quickly, lock down restrictions were implemented. This had a profound effect on not only the group dynamics, but on each individual within the group. As a result of the pandemic, my role within my organisation changed drastically. My working hours and conditions were amended to meet the response and demand needs of the ambulance service. As a result, my ability to study was severely impeded. Reluctantly, I was forced to apply for a break from studying in order to form part of the Ambulance Service's response to the pandemic. My studies were put on hold for almost three years in total as a result of the pandemic. This time lapse not only removed me from the work on which I was basing my assignment, but also eroded the energy and motivation that had been developed within my peer group. When the pandemic was finally over, the cohort of people with whom I had embarked on the course had completely fragmented. Some were able to continue their studies throughout the pandemic and had completed the module and moved forward. Some had discontinued their studies totally. I was lucky that I had one colleague and friend with whom I worked who was studying the same course as me, and we continued to try and support each other through the learning process. We were however both experiencing the pressure of

the pandemic on our professional and personal lives. We both lost close friends and colleagues to the disease and both experienced periods of ill health. Nevertheless, with each other's support and that of our tutor, we decided to continue working towards our goal. The constant pressures felt by the NHS, as well as the wider system was a constant barrier to me being able to find the time to study. Instead of being a great opportunity for me to develop my academic skills, my studies were now becoming an additional source of stress and worry. As time marched on, submission dates would come and go, and on more than one occasion, I felt that the only option would be to end my studies. With the help and advice from my tutor, I applied for extra time to complete my studies, which was kindly granted and gratefully received. Finally, after two interruptions to studies, I took the decision to try and complete the module. By this time however, my colleague had moved on to another position in another organisation and had decided to discontinue his studies. This meant I was now flying solo. The loss of this support mechanism had quite a profound effect on me, and I did for a short period of time consider ending my own studies also. This was further impacted by the difficulty I was experiencing in trying to allocate study leave to enable me to complete the work. Following discussions with my tutor, I decided to continue with my studies as planned. I have endeavoured to complete my studies in the best way I can, drawing on the support of my tutor who has been extremely accommodating and patient with me. I have based my assignment on a piece of quality improvement work I undertook prior to the pandemic. I have also drawn upon the learning and knowledge I gained from an extensive learning programme I undertook with the Institute of Health Improvement (IHI), a programme from which I took the title of Improvement Advisor.

I have found it very difficult to try and translate my day job into an academic piece of writing. I am a modest person and would not normally draw attention to myself or my work in order to receive praise or recognition for it. Therefore, this exercise was an alien concept for me. Reflection as a concept has formed part of my clinical practice for many years, but as I will explain later in this essay, I have found the use of reflection as part of this educational process, very difficult to understand, and therefore, very difficult to undertake.

2. Reflective Observation:

I had no real assumptions of the RAL process going into it, but I thought that the transfer of lived experiences into a written assignment would not be a difficult task to undertake. As the module commenced, I had a high level of confidence in the knowledge and learning I had attained from the work I had undertaken as part of my professional role that I was going to evaluate. I was in possession of a lot of information and evidence from which to draw and felt happy that all I needed would be easily transferable. My personal experience however was to be quite to the contrary. I quickly realised that a simple information dump or copy and paste exercise would not be appropriate for the assignment. I started to collect and collate information from the work I had undertaken for use within the assignment which I felt would be pertinent to the task. However, on reflection, I now realise that I was collating so much information having not thought about how much I would actually need, and how I was going to present it. My assumption was that collating all this information would give me a starting point from which to formulate a portfolio of evidence. However, what actually happened was that I became overwhelmed with too much information which was, in essence, drowning my ability to write a coherent piece of work. I decided to take a step back and reconsider my approach. In

essence, I was actually reflecting in action in order to try and change the direction in which my studies were travelling. Reflection in action is a process of reflection that focusses primarily on the present or immediate time. Schon 1991 describes concepts of reflection in action and reflection on action as part of his own reflective model. Reflecting in action can be particularly useful in situations where one may need to make immediate decisions and try alternative approaches whilst the experience is still happening. One of the strengths of this model is that it enables the writer to consider reflecting in action whilst the experience is happening, and link them with reflection on action, which occurs after the event. Having undertaken this brief period of reflection in action, I decided to write a plan of action. This was drawn from some of the learning from my assignment, that is the use of a process map. It was pleasing that I was employing some of the learning from my portfolio to inform the development of my RAL portfolio. The process map gave me a visual roadmap or plan of what I was attempting to achieve. This together with my re-written learning outcomes became the guidance documents for my studies. I learned that the tools and techniques of which I was writing as part of my assignment, were indeed the tools and techniques I needed to employ as part of my studies. This was another period of reflection in action and also a bit of a light bulb moment for me as I started to understand the concept of what I was trying to achieve. The fact that I was using these tools and techniques was proof indeed, that the learning of which I was writing in my portfolio, had indeed resulted in not only learning, but a change in my professional practice. With a plan in place, I was now able to formulate a more structured approach to my studies. I further appreciated the need for planning and preparation of relevant information. I had almost become very data rich, but also information poor.

My biggest learning curve throughout the process was the concept of time management, or rather my lack of it. I realised all too quickly that what may appear to be simple tasks, can in fact consume significant amounts of time. Being able to achieve time away from work and home life, and also allocating time to my studies has continued to be difficult to achieve, and so had become a source of much stress and anxiety. On reflection, I now appreciate that planning specific time for study is just as important as preparing the information. I am aware that the lack of time management on my part has had a detrimental effect not only on my ability to study effectively, but also on the quality of the work I have been able to submit.

As I continue to reflect on my journey, it has become very apparent to me that I found it very difficult to work effectively following the dispersal of the cohort of students with whom I started the course. I am a very social person and have a learning style which is very much geared towards shared experiences and working with others. For quite a period of time, I felt very isolated with my studies and found that I very much missed the social interaction with my peers. As I have previously explained that I draw energy and motivation from other people, so the sudden loss of this support mechanism was difficult for me to accept and process. On reflection, I can now see that I could have made better use of online platforms to establish regular contact with other members of the group. This however did become more and more difficult as the rest of the cohort were moving forward with their studies while I had paused mine.

My lack of planning from the offset has resulted in several 'false starts' in the development of my portfolio. I had failed to implement any sort of strategic plan at the start of the process. This resulted in a lot of disjointed work due to there being no distinct plan to follow. The ensuing chaos resulted in several rethinks and rewrites of

the portfolio. I eventually employed the skills I had learned from the project of which I was writing, to formulate a coherent plan of action. Unfortunately, due to my poor time planning and management, it was implemented a little too late in order for it to have optimal benefit to my work. My learning is that if I had implemented the plan earlier, I would have made regular steps forward in my studies, instead of having to make regular steps backwards to remedy poorly planned, and therefore poorly written work.

3. Abstract Conceptualisation:

Having reflected on my experiences in sections one and two, I will now focus on what this process has taught me, and how I will implement this learning going forward. To help illustrate this, I will answer the following two questions: -

- What could I have done better or differently?
- How will I deal with similar situations going forward?

I will endeavour to address these two questions together, rather than address them separately. The simplest answer would be for me to say I would have done everything differently, however, that is not the case. There are positives to take from what I have done, not least of all that I was able to submit a piece of work in spite of all the barriers I have come up against. But this reflective process has brought to light some key learning points for me. I have learned that in order to undertake any kind of academic work, time is a major factor that must be foremost in the planning stage. On reflection, I am able to look back at my experience and clearly see how much better I could have done had I planned my time more efficiently. I have also learned that short sharp bursts of time are detrimental to the flow of work, particularly if there are extended time lapses between sessions. Working in this manner means

that much of the allotted time is spent reading previous work and catching up with what has already been written in order to get the flow of the work done thus far.

Having now started to undertake academic study again, I will ensure that adequate time allocation is key to future planning. My reflection has shown me that I can plan my activities very well but have not yet mastered the art of allocating times to these activities. A lesson I will carry forward into any future academic endeavours.

During the latter part of this module, I have learned to take full advantage of online platforms, particularly those that enable social interaction and engagement with my peers. I have previously described my feeling of isolation following the onset of the pandemic. That together with me pausing my studies meant that my peer group had moved on and left me behind. However, I have more recently been able to engage with a new cohort of students who are undertaking the same educational pathway. This has once again given me a sense of belonging and a source of motivation and energy. I will endeavour to make full use of these platforms going forward and make a concerted effort to establish and maintain peer relationships with the rest of the group.

As explained previously, my planning and time management of my work was initially poorly executed. I have reflected hard on this element of my learning as I feel it was to the most detriment to the quality of my work. Being in a much better position both professionally and personally, I am confident that with any future academic endeavours, I will be able to employ my newly acquired planning skills and use them to avoid the pitfalls I have experienced and reflected upon in this essay.

4. Active Experimentation:

In Kolb's cycle, this element is where the writer would start to implement the know learning and knowledge into practice, employing new found skills to realise the learning from reflection. This reflective account has been based upon recent concrete experience and is therefore providing me with learning and knowledge that I will take forward into future practice. I have therefore been able to draw the learning and knowledge from this reflective process, but not yet had the opportunity to put that learning into action. It has however given me a true insight into my own personal learning style and enabled me to critique what I have seen. Based on what I have learned from this process, I have already started to formulate plans and strategies for the remaining parts of my studies. Learning from the mistakes I have made thus far. In terms of Kolb's learning cycle, I am taking the learning back to the first element of the model, which will be a new concrete experience.

Conclusion:

This reflective process has been a difficult one for me to undertake. Reflection is not a completely new concept to me, in fact, I have championed the concept of reflection in my professional role for a long time. In a similar way to nursing, the paramedic profession has embraced reflection as a tool for personal learning and development. In my previous role as a paramedic tutor, I have previously facilitated reflection with students as they embark on their clinical training. I have, for a long time appreciated the need for reflection in clinical practice. As Jasper explains:

Reflective practice is an essential tool for helping health care students make the link between theory and practice. It enables you to develop your

knowledge and skills towards becoming a professional practitioner.

Essentially, reflective practice means taking our experiences as a starting point for learning. By thinking about them in a purposeful way- using the reflective processes- we can come to understand them differently and take action as a result. (Jasper 2003 p, 1).

For many years now, paramedic education has embraced reflective practice as an integral component of its curriculum. Jones and Cookson state that:

Reflective practice should be developed alongside clinical competence in order to deal with the changing and complex demands of healthcare needs on paramedic services". (Jones and Cookson 2000 p.153).

They qualify this by explaining that:

The Ambulance Service is changing, and Reflective Practice must form part of that change if the profession is going to evolve and grow professionally. (Jones and Cookson 2000 p.153).

This experience, however, has seen a difficult transition from facilitator to reflector. I have guided many students through the reflective process, using various different models, but somewhere along the journey, I forgot how to be a reflective practitioner in my own right. In relation to this difficult shift from teacher to facilitator, Townsend cites the work of Knowles and Rogers who suggest that this shift:

Requires people to divest themselves of the protective shield of being an authority figure and expose themselves as authentic people with feelings, hopes, aspirations, insecurities, worries and weaknesses. (Townsend 1990 p.66).

In addition to this, my perception of reflection had always been that it was a private and personal endeavour, not to be assessed, marked, or scrutinised by anyone else.

In support of this, Jasper says that:

Reflection is a solitary learning activity and, while other people can help you to do it, the insights and learning that will be achieved will be just yours. (Jasper 2003 p,135).

I have therefore found it difficult to write a reflective account that is prepared for someone else to read and assess. One might argue that one's freedom to be totally honest and frank within reflective writing may be stifled by the idea that it will be read by another person for the purpose of academic learning. One could further argue that reflective writing for this purpose does not achieve the outcome and learning that it was designed to. That said, from a purely cathartic perspective, I have gained a lot of personal learning by undertaking this reflective activity. I will take away the learning from it and ensure that it is utilised in future practice. For me, this epitomises the advantages of reflective practice to the individual undertaking the process. In what has been the first reflective activity I have undertaken in some considerable time, I have taken much learning and knowledge, not only about the process of study I have undertaken, but also about myself as a person. However, under normal circumstances, that is in the case of reflective practice in the clinical arena, this document would be placed within a reflective portfolio and retained for the sole purpose of personal learning and development. The fact that I now have to submit this very personal account is an unusual concept for me, and one that I find very difficult to comprehend. But one could argue that therein lies the whole point of the Active Experimentation, element four of Kolb's cycle. Taking the learning from reflection and translating them into actions to take forward into new concrete

experiences. After all, the aim of the cycle is to take all new learning and knowledge gained into new experiences, thus completing the cycle.

It has long been proved that reflection is now an embedded element of clinical education and clinical practice. However, this reflective journey has been a personal and professional learning experience for me. It has afforded me an opportunity to examine my learning and study styles, reflect upon them, and take the learning from them to inform and improve my skills going forward. I have to admit that although I have not partaken in reflective practice for some time, I feel I have a rekindled interest in it. It remains to see if I will maintain this newly found enthusiasm for reflection, as Taylor explains:

It is easy to do something when it is novel. It is another thing to maintain something, which has lost some of its original appeal and requires a certain amount of discipline and attention for its continued use. Days of weakened resolve may come for you as a reflective practitioner.

(Taylor 2000 p.239).

I shall try to embed reflection into my work, both clinical and non-clinical, but more importantly, into my academic studies.

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