

Applying reflection to professional practice

Why reflect on practice?

Critical reflection has long been used in health-related, caring and teaching professions, and its value is recognised increasingly in other areas such as management and business. There are a number of reasons for this, such as:

- it anchors theory in meaningful, concrete experience, helping to bring it alive;
- it gives recognition to learning gained in non-academic contexts;
- it provides a bridge between practical experience and academic study;
- it helps develop understanding of difficult work situations, improving professional practice.

The workplace as a resource

Work contexts offer rich resources for meaningful study. However, there are ethical considerations that you must take on board. Ensure that you retain confidentiality and anonymity with respect to workplace information. You may be able to use examples if names and details are removed in such a way that the workplace and individuals cannot be identified, or if you gain written permission. You will need permission to use workplace documentation if it is not already in the public arena. It is likely that your programme will ask you to consider the ethical implications of the focus you have selected and the material you will be using.

Reflection on the knowledge base

Your workplace practice is likely to be based, at least in part, on theories, research or established professional wisdom. You can build your own expertise and understanding by drawing on these as part of your critical reflection.

- **Select a relevant theory** or piece of research that relates to your work context.
- **Identify what it would mean in your context.** What, in summary, do the theory or research findings propose? If this theory or research applied to your work context, what would you expect to happen? What would you expect to see, hear, feel, experience, understand better, etc.?
- **Check whether it applies.** In practice, do the theory or research findings apply to your context as expected? How do they throw light on your own experiences? In what ways do they help – or not help – you to make sense of your professional practice?
- **Identify probable cause.** If the theory or research findings do not seem to apply as expected, how do they differ? Why is that likely to be the case? For example, are you working with a different client group than that used for the initial research? Are other conditions different? Do any other theories throw light on your findings?
- **Support for change.** Do your reflections suggest that any change is needed in your workplace – such as a review of procedures or a change in expectations? How do research findings or established theories support your case?

Challenge your own previous practice

Use your critical reflections to challenge your previous thinking, assumptions and actions. Re-examine these in the light of what you have read. If you find that this, in itself, raises difficult issues, reflect on where these difficulties lie, how they have arisen, and how you will address them. Talk to your tutor or your workplace supervisor about any complex issues or concerns.

Presenting your reflection to others

Logs, blog, journals

It is likely that your initial reflections will be written primarily as phase 1 reflection in a journal or blog. If you are asked to submit these as part of an assignment, then read through them following the guidelines in the Audience sections of pages 213 and 228. Amend them accordingly, deleting or blocking out material that you decide not to submit. If your initial reflections are very lengthy, it may be advisable to edit these, or to highlight the salient parts, to help your reader manage the bulk and identify the most relevant sections.

Reflective summary or essay

Typically, you will be asked to produce a critical reflective summary, essay or report. This tends to carry the most weight in an assignment and merits time and attention so as to do justice to what you have learnt. It is important to bear in mind the following.

Academic conventions

Ensure that you apply the usual academic conventions. See pages 167–89.

Referring to theory and research

You may have provided an outline of your background research as part of a project report or made references to different theoretical perspectives within your phase 1 reflection. However, it is essential that you also relate theory to practice within your reflective summary or essay, bringing a critical eye to these, and making clear how they influenced your reflection and practice.

Examples Making use of theory

Example 1: Business student

When interviewing these participants on their employment history, details of their personal lives emerged. I hadn't expected to become preoccupied by my own anxiety. Smith (1992)

feels that for sensitive topics, there should be an experienced co-leader present 'to adequately monitor the group's comfort level'. I had thought this to be an extreme position for business settings but these interviews made me think again. My difficulty with Smith's suggestion is that having someone present with only that role might be off-putting to the group – and make them feel spied upon. One alternative might be to use two interviewers . . .

Example 2: Education student

A number of authors draw links between feeding and teaching (Coren, 1997; Williams, 1997). Salzberger-Wittenberg (1983) notes that the processes involved in learning and digestion are similar, i.e. taking in, absorbing and producing. . . . Within education, 'spoon-feeding' is often used as a metaphor for poor practice, encouraging shallow learning and 'regurgitation'. My reflections on my teaching are that the process is considerably more complex than I had believed. I shall demonstrate that . . .

Common errors to avoid

When relating theory and practice:

- Avoid putting all references to theory in the opening paragraphs and then forgetting it. If you summarise the research at the outset, make sure that you refer back to it at relevant points throughout the essay.
- Avoid referring to theory without directly linking it to your reflections.
- Avoid reproducing at length the content of theory, such as *Freud said X. He also said Y. He also said Z.* Rather, be specific about how the theory or research is useful or limiting in explaining why something happens.