

ECAC7003

Drawing upon your experience and an appropriate ethical and reflective framework (e.g., Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 2014), critically reflect upon your learning from this module and future development needs as a researcher.

Self-reflection has become a major aspect of both the fields of counselling and of research theory and practice, supporting research practitioners to effectively meet standards of professionalism, discretion, and ethical practice. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. extol the benefits of reflexivity **for the researcher**: 'Reflexivity is an essential requirement for good qualitative research' (2014: p.63). Aimed in part at **counsellors**, *The critically reflective practitioner* (Thompson, S. & Thompson, N., 2018), is included on the reading list for the BA in Counselling at Coleg Sir Gar, amongst other courses, where reflective writing forms a core element of assessment. The writers aver that, 'it is now being recognised that reflective practice should be seen as a foundation for all professional practice'. Therefore, it seems appropriate to be applying a reflective model to our learning on **this** course.

Writing about the relationship between experience and learning, David Kolb has defined experiential learning as, "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combinations of grasping and transforming the experience" (1984, p.41) In order to assist or perhaps describe this process, Kolb devised a reflective model (fig.1). I have used his model of reflection firstly to describe key experiences and, subsequently, to identify the resulting observations that come to mind as I reflect on this course. I have gone on to note the abstract learning I have derived from those reflections and plans for future action as a result of that learning.

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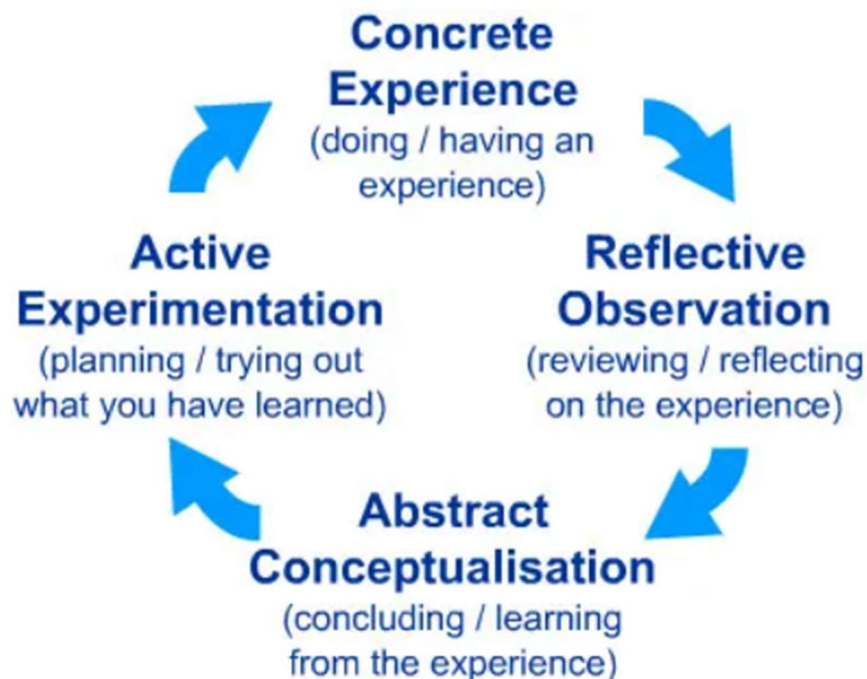


Figure 1: Kolb's Reflective Model (1984)

At the outset of this module, I was feeling very excited about the prospect of developing the skills in order to be able to carry out research. Superstar researcher (her TED talk has 56 million views!) Brené Brown has brought grounded theory to a mass audience - it gives her findings on shame and vulnerability much more validity and, therefore, impact. Her description at TEDx Houston (2010) of having post-it notes all over her living room while she tried to figure out her participants' relationship with shame, like piecing together a patchwork quilt to create patterns, order, and coherence, sounded like exactly the sort of work I wanted to do. As a former literature student, I have always loved analysing language and looking for patterns, for example in poetry, so analysing participants' discourse plays to my strengths and interests. However, I am also what Kolb, in his learning styles model (1984),

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describes as a pragmatist, and love to repair things and solve problems - I recently spent a Saturday night fixing my dishwasher for fun! Research offers the possibility of finding a practical application for that passion for language, for the benefit of others. My research journey really began when I completed some CPD on understanding research papers for NCT in my quest to improve my research literacy; later, I began reading research papers for my Foundation Degree in Counselling, so I had a little familiarity with the basics. I still felt conscious of my incompetence - knowing that it was important to be able to critique research papers before evaluating their findings, but also feeling overwhelmed by the amount of specialist terminology which they employed. In addition, having qualified as a professional counsellor in June 2020, I've had put my attraction to research practice on hold to focus on embedding my new skills - the launch of the counselling-based research MA by UWTSD helped me to see a way of marrying the two interests.

Possibly my biggest learning to date has been that I don't need to know or understand everything I read. When the module started, I read everything ahead of time and felt overwhelmed. I had to look at the definitions of ontology and epistemology over and over again, writing and rewriting my own definitions until the penny dropped. I realised that it would take time for me to be able to use terminology confidently. Assembling my presentation really helped me to learn heuristically through applying the relevant terminology, and I think this is where my best learning occurred. When I was training to be a teacher, I learned that when we learn new vocabulary we go through three phases: firstly being able to understand vocabulary when used by others, then being able to use it in our

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own writing and finally being confident to use it in spoken discourse. It is a journey. I am beginning to feel more consciously competent and more at ease this term, having shuttled between conscious incompetence and conscious competence in several cycles last term on the conscious competence spectrum. Donald Rumsfeld's phrase, 'known unknowns' (U.S. Defense Briefing, 2002) has been one I've found useful in capturing this slightly abstract point. Part of being a researcher means being comfortable with having identified that there are things I don't know, and for me this applies not only to research topics but also to research theory. I'm feeling increasingly comfortable with reading things I am puzzled by. I can park them – it's not always worth my precious time to try to understand every last bit of theory or research if I'm not going to use it. However, if I later see the relevance to my activities I can go back and make sense of it when I have a practical application for it, or when another missing piece of the puzzle is in place. This approach fits very well with a multidisciplinary approach to research – I can't be the expert on everything, but I can improve my skills in identifying what I need help with and how to go about securing that help. The Super Saturdays which this course offers, during which multi-disciplinary teams of post-graduate students are given real-world problems to work on, have shown me the value of collaboration with those who have different expertise.

My awareness of my limitations holds particularly true for the field of quantitative research methods and analysis. I'm offering myself patience here. A strategy I have come to rely on when I come across literature which refers to studies whose methods I have yet to understand, I have learned to use secondary methods to assess the validity of studies.

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Examples of these methods might be noting the number of times a paper has been cited or whether it is peer-reviewed in order to mitigate my ignorance. This has been a liberating learning point, freeing me to engage with research studies more critically, which I might have previously deemed to be beyond my scope of understanding.

Another big learning that happened for me was around the scope of my research. I was required to work on an idea for a research study twice last term and decided to explore two different ideas in order to help me evaluate which direction I might pursue in my final project. The first idea, which formed the vehicle for demonstrating my understanding of how to apply qualitative and quantitative approaches, centred on researching the reduction in breastfeeding rates for later-born siblings compared to firstborns. The second idea, which provided the opportunity to demonstrate my ability to write a research proposal, centred on the use of the therapist's voice to develop an MP3 of a guided body scan. Both of the research ideas were based on topics where the literature is still emerging around the variables that contribute both to the problem and to the effectiveness of interventions that might be developed to address those issues. I realized pretty quickly that it would be hard for me to design research with internal validity that tried to both find the variables that contributed to particular outcomes and the most effective interventions to address those outcomes – I got into a tangle trying to do this and things became much simpler once I acknowledged that I would have to live with certain unknowns in my research, either in terms of causation or solutions. As I have learned, the narrower the scope of a research project, the more easily its validity can be demonstrated.

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I have sometimes looked back on the literature degree I chose aged seventeen, feeling frustrated that I made the wrong choice in not studying psychology all those years ago. However, what I learned about the nebulousness or slipperiness of meaning and the role power plays in the construction of meaning have stood me in good stead for this MA. Additionally, my discovery of the work of Carl Rogers and the person-centred approach through my counselling training have cemented my belief in the constructivist nature of meaning. I see meaning as dynamic and intangible but I'm also aware of the way that meanings compete. Certain meanings are privileged because they serve the interests of power. It's my aspiration to decentre power over meaning from myself as the therapist, the potentially more powerful voice, and to share the responsibility for creating meaning with the client. I think this appreciation has given me a good perspective on the knowledge offered by research. My perception is that I have a healthy scepticism for positivist research – I don't believe in a single, verifiable truth. However, I'm not entirely comfortable with an approach that doesn't acknowledge any consensus on meaning either. I find myself drawn towards a middle way, which acknowledges that knowledge is always imperfect and created by power structures, but that a better alternative has yet to emerge. Realist approaches have given us lots of beneficial interventions such as the development of antibiotics and the eradication of smallpox. I love reading theory, but I personally want to engage in research which delivers practical benefits to others, rather than purely academic outcomes. To me, this compromise entails adopting a critical realist ontology and a pragmatic or contextualist epistemology.

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I am still uncertain as to what topic to choose as the focus for my research and dissertation. As a mature student, I am well aware of the time needed to develop experience and a reputation within a profession, time which is more limited for those of us in our middle years, so I want to choose a field with lots of potential for commissioning and employment that will stimulate my curiosity for years to come. However, I am also fortunate to be able to draw on an existing network of contacts in sectors allied with counselling and wellbeing. I also have a background in counselling, adult and adolescent education, transition to parenthood and volunteer management, which all provide ample areas for research which falls within the scope of this MA.

I am really interested in mixed methods designs described in Creswell and Creswell (2018), which seem to be ideally designed to meet the needs of critical realist researchers. These designs allow researchers to quantitatively test theories developed through qualitative research and/or qualitatively explore possible reasons for quantitative results. I can see lots of possibilities for researching topics in this way that make the most of my abilities as a linguistic analyst who might, in the future, learn to carry out quantitative analysis or collaborate with quantitative researchers in order to produce multi-disciplinary research. I particularly like the exploratory sequential core design (p.229), which encourages researchers to gather ideas about cause and effect from qualitative research before developing interventions from those ideas which can be quantitatively tested. I think this could give my future research greater impact on a Public Health commissioning and policy-making audience.

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When considering my future relationship with reflexivity and ethics, I think that those of us who work as professional counsellors are embedded in a culture which has been developed to remind us regularly to reflexively consider ethics. The supervision requirement is a powerful tool in holding us accountable to an ethical consensus. Although my supervisor is contracted by my employers to oversee my client work, the supervision sessions are holistic, and my wider decision-making is regularly examined from an ethical perspective. Another holistic aspect to my practice is my Buddhist spirituality. My Buddhist practice and community also require me to consider the impact of my actions on others and to nurture my commitment to the benefit of others, so I hope that this pillar of my life will help reinforce my capacity to make ethical decisions. Braun and Clarke write that reflexivity 'is vital for reflecting on, learning from, and moving beyond, the discriminatory research practices we almost all (unintentionally) engage in' (2013, p.63). They describe two forms of reflexivity: functional reflexivity which 'involves giving critical attention to the way our research tools and process may have influenced the research' and personal reflexivity, which involves 'bringing the researcher into the research, making us visible as part of the research process' (*ibid.*, p.37). They strongly recommend keeping a reflexive research journal throughout the research process in order to use writing as a reflective tool to aid insight into our thoughts and feelings. I can see how this could be a great aid in bringing my unconscious research biases into my conscious awareness so that I can acknowledge them and aspire to bracket them - the epoché suggested by Husserl. This could also be useful as a way of maintaining one's commitment to reflexivity over time.

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This assignment has been an illuminating exercise when reflecting on the journey I have so far taken in developing as a practising researcher, helping me to consider possible directions to pursue in the coming terms. I am, more than ever, convinced of the importance of reflexivity for my field.

Word count: 2182

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