

PRACTICE BASED AND REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Many academic disciplines require students to develop awareness of issues associated with professional practice. This may occur through the discussion of possible or fictional scenarios, or through reflection on actual experience, gained through work placements, voluntary work and internships. Increasingly, students undertaking degrees not aimed at a specific profession are also undertaking placements to build their skill-base. In both cases, they may be asked to reflect on their experiences in essays, reports and presentations.

Writing and thinking reflectively in an academic setting is often a new practice for students. In addition, placements can put particular pressure on time management, especially if academic commitments run concurrently.

These guides will show you how to use your experience as evidence to support your discussion; how to integrate theory and practice; how to use each to build your understanding of the other; how and when to use the first person in reflective writing; and other issues about writing style.

Reflective thinking

Reflective thinking is essential for success in unpredictable and complex situations such as working with customers or clients.

Reflective thinking helps you to:

- * **Develop** a questioning attitude and new perspectives
- * **Identify** areas for change and improvement
- * **Respond** effectively to new challenges

- * **Generalise** and apply what you have learned from one situation to other situations

You may be asked to think reflectively at university when completing assignments that draw on your experience in placements or prior employment, or when considering your own skills and experience and where you might need to develop (for careers learning or general academic development, for instance).

Being able to think reflectively is an important transferrable skill that will help you to showcase your achievements at job interviews, and is also worth mentioning in its own right.

The reflective learning cycle

This cycle is iterative, so it doesn't stop after one rotation; you apply what you learn, then continue to reflect and develop further.

- Plan

Based on the wider context, theory, models of knowledge and practice, previous experience etc. think carefully about how others have performed similar tasks and use this understanding to develop, modify, change, adapt, and then formulate an action plan for the situation you are expecting to encounter.

- Act

Apply the method or approaches developed in the Plan, with a client or situation. Maintain self-awareness. Be prepared to creatively adapt and change goals as you go along - while keeping your plan in mind.

- Observe

As soon as possible, review the session and your observations of what happened, the effects on the client or situation and on yourself. Produce an accurate and objective description of the event.

- Reflect

Reflect upon and evaluate the session and your actions. Analyse your own experience of what you did and how you did it. Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your actions, identify problems and issues for investigation, develop your insight. There is no correct answer and some things may remain difficult to interpret. Did you achieve your plan? Did your goals change? How did your actions affect the situation and how did the situation affect you? How do your observations fit with the theories you have read?

- Plan again...

Formulate a new action plan based on your experience in the previous situation or session with the client. Use the outcomes of your reflection, rethinking and reinterpreting. Include the wider context of theory, models of knowledge and practice.

- Act again... and so on.

Developing your reflective insights

Be prepared to:

- * Stand back from the events and try to be objective
- * Be critical of your own actions
- * Think of alternative explanations of events
- * Make use of evidence from a range of sources e.g. theories
- * Recognise that your own point of view will change with time
- * Discuss with others to deepen your insight and explore a range of perspectives
- * Reflective questions to ask yourself
- * Why did I respond in this way?
- * What was I thinking and feeling - did this influence me, and why?
- * What was the client thinking and feeling, what is the evidence for this?

- * What else could I have done?
- * What would I do in a similar situation?

Consider the following:

- * How does my experience compare to what I have read? Are there any theories that would help explain what happened?
- * What might be the results of doing things differently? What evidence is there to show things might change if done differently?
- * How has the experience changed my understanding?

Tip: Keep comparing theory to practice and exploring the relationship between the two.

On reflective learning:

'It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively.'

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*. London, UK: Further Education Unit.

Using theory

Assignments involving reflective thinking often ask you to refer to both relevant theories and your own experiences, but what does this mean? Academic theories and your professional observations are both evidence that you need to use to support your points, but they are different types of evidence:

Academic theories provide a generalised model or framework to help you understand what might be happening in a situation - the Reflective Learning Cycle explained above is an example of a theoretical model - it gives you a structure to compare your own experiences to and language to help you explain what is happening.

Your own experiences are what happens in practice; these may be more complex and richer than an abstract model, but it can be harder to

see what is relevant. By comparing your experiences to a theory or theories, you can develop some more insightful explanations for what happened. Also use your own experiences to interrogate and question theories - does the theory fit what happened? If not, why? Does the theory only explain part of the story? Does the theory need to be adapted for different situations?

Reflective writing

Reflective writing involves an exploration and explanation of an event. It may feel particularly difficult and more challenging than other forms of academic writing as it involves thinking and writing about anxieties and errors as well as successes in your interactions with an individual or when carrying out a practical task. Try to stand back from the situation and be as objective as possible. Although you are writing about your own experiences and feelings, you need to be as rigorous and thorough as you would be for any other assignment.

Follow the guidelines for your course. There is likely to be a word limit: you cannot write about everything, so select what will illustrate your discussion best. Remember that most of the marks awarded for your work are likely to be for the reflective insights and not for the description of events, so keep your descriptions brief and to the point.

Key features

Reflective writing is a way of processing your practice-based experience to produce learning. It has two key features:

- 1) It integrates theory and practice. Identify important aspects of your reflections and write these using the appropriate theories and academic context to explain and interpret your reflections. Use your experiences to evaluate the theories - can the theories be adapted or modified to be more helpful for your situation?
- 2) It identifies the learning outcomes of your experience. So you might include a plan for next time identifying what you would do differently, your new understandings or values and unexpected things you have learnt about yourself.

Using academic evidence

You are aiming to draw out the links between theory and practice. So you will need to keep comparing the two and exploring the relationship between them.

Analyse the event and think about it with reference to a particular theory or academic evidence:

- * Are your observations consistent with the theory, models or published academic evidence?
- * How can the theories help you to interpret your experience?
- * Also consider how your experience in practice helps you to understand the theories. Does it seem to bear out what the theories have predicted?
- * Or is it quite different? If so, can you identify why it's different? (Perhaps you were operating in different circumstances from the original research, for instance.)

Two good tips:

Be selective: Identify challenging or successful parts of the encounter. Reflect deeply on a few significant aspects and learning points.

Discuss your reflections with others to deepen your insight, improve your ability to express your ideas and help to explore a range of perspectives.

Collecting evidence

There are two sources of evidence which need to be used in reflective writing assignments:

- 1) Your reflections form essential evidence of your experiences. Keep notes on your reflections and the developments that have occurred during the process.
- 2) Academic evidence from published case studies and theories to show how your ideas and practices have developed in the context of the relevant academic literature.

Selecting the content

- 1) Write a log of the event. Describe what happened as briefly and objectively as possible. You might be asked to include the log as an appendix to your assignment but it is mostly for

your own benefit so that you can recall what occurred accurately.

Important tip: You should not include a long narrative in your final piece of writing describing everything that happened, as you will then run out of space to analyse why it happened. However you will find it helpful to write out the narrative in full for yourself, so think of this long account as part of your evidence that you are going to draw on. Then summarise it by picking out the key points for what you are reflecting on in this piece of writing, just as you would with any other text that you read and use as evidence.

2) Reflect. You should reflect upon the experience before you start to write, although additional insights are likely to emerge throughout the writing process. Discuss with a friend or colleague and develop your insight. Keep notes on your thinking.

3) Select. Identify relevant examples which illustrate the reflective process; choose a few of the most challenging or puzzling incidents and explore why they are interesting and what you have learnt from them.

Start with the points you want to make, then select examples to back up your points, from your two sources of evidence:

- i) your experiences
- ii) theories, published case studies, or academic articles.

Use the reflective learning cycle to structure your writing:

- * plan;
- * act;
- * observe;
- * reflect;
- * plan again etc.

This will make sure you cover the whole process and explain not just what happened, but why it happened and what improvements can be made based on your new understanding.

Getting the language right

As a large proportion of your reflective account is based on your own experience, it is normally appropriate to use the first person ('I'). However, most assignments containing reflective writing will also include academic writing. You are therefore likely to need to write both in the first person ("I felt...") and in the third person ("Smith (2009) proposes that ..."). Identify which parts of your experience you are being asked to reflect on and use this as a guide to when to use the first person. Always check your guidelines if you are not sure. If guidelines are not available then, in your introduction, explain when and why you are going to use "I" in your writing.

You will produce a balance by weaving together sections of 'I thought...' 'I felt,...' and the relevant academic theories in the same section or paragraph. This is more effective than having a section which deals with the theory and a separate section dealing with your experiences.

Try to avoid emotive or subjective terms. Even though you are drawing on your experiences (and they may well have been emotional), you are trying to communicate these to your reader in an academic style. This means using descriptions that everyone would understand in the same way. So rather than writing, "The client was very unhappy at the start of the session", it might be better to write, "The client was visibly distressed", or "The client reported that he was very unhappy". This shows that you are aware that the client's understanding of 'unhappiness' may be quite different from yours or your reader's.

When writing about your reflections use the past tense as you are referring to a particular moment (I felt...). When referring to theory use the present tense as the ideas are still current (Smith proposes that...).

Some examples of how this works in practice:

One objective of the session was to help the client to understand the connection between her thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This is an important aim of HSD (Bloggs, 2009). To achieve this objective the following HSD method was used (Smith, 2006). At times during the session I was too directive and could have used more open

questions to allow the client more opportunity to verbalise her understanding.

During the session the client stated... It would have been useful to explore this further.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on **Practice-Based and Reflective Learning**. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

<https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/reflective>

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice