

Boud, Keogh and Walker: Reflection and Learning

At work, opportunities to learn from our experiences occur every day. However, experience itself often results in minimal learning without a deliberate effort on the part of the learner. In their book ***Reflection: Turning Experience Into Learning***[1], Boud et al. present a model of reflection that helps individuals to turn their experiences into useful learning. In this article, we examine the benefits to be gained from using their structured process.



What is reflection?

Reflection is an activity in which individuals subject their experiences to rigorous questioning and deep probing about what happened, why it happened, and how it happened. It is a useful tool that individuals can use to:

- evaluate their experiences, turning them into genuine learning activities
- learn from mistakes, revise approaches and plan for the future
- repeat successes
- clarify thoughts and emotions

Common to all approaches to reflection is the attempt to convert unplanned, impulsive action into self-aware, intelligent action.

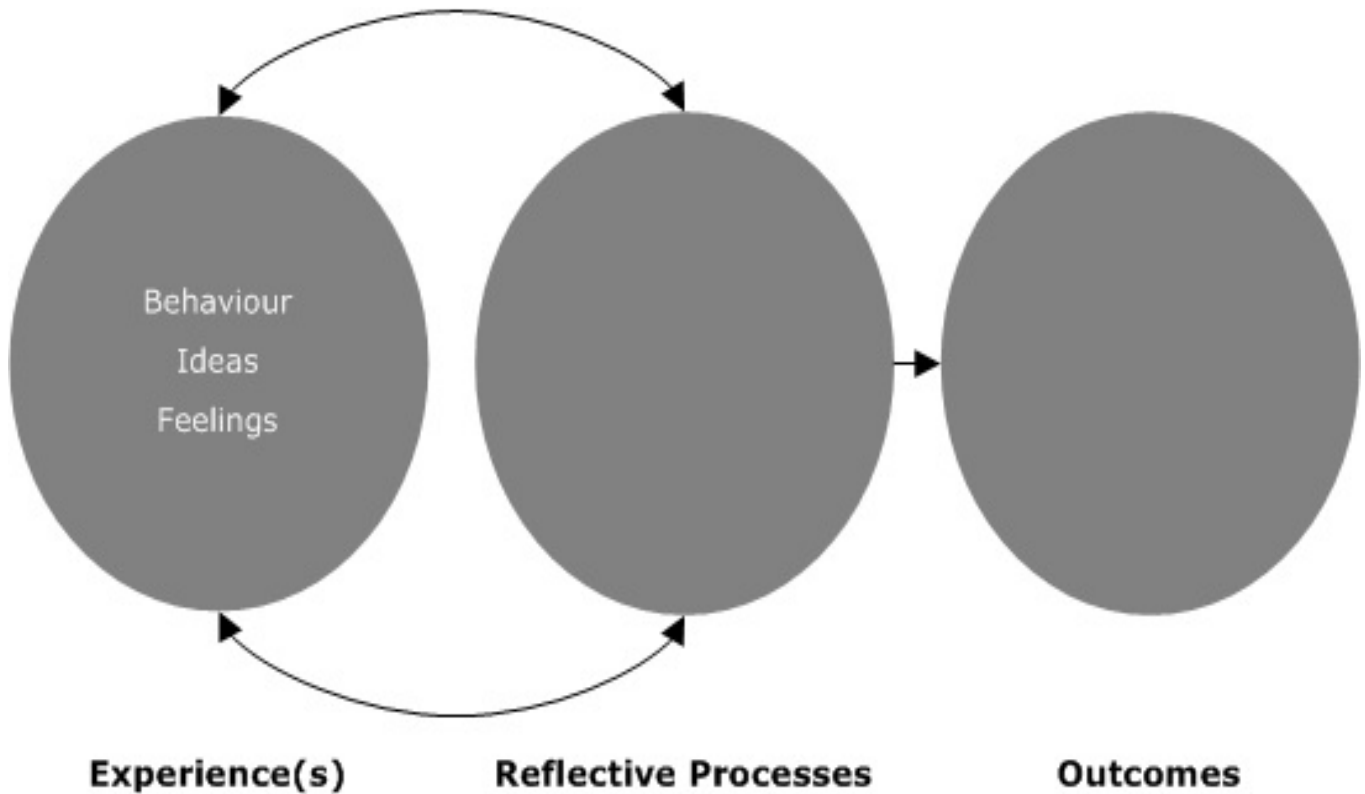
Learning from experience

Boud, Keogh and Walker's model of reflection in the learning process comprises three stages:

1. Experience(s)
2. Reflective processes
3. Outcomes

Each of the three stages are examined in more detail below.

1. Experience(s)

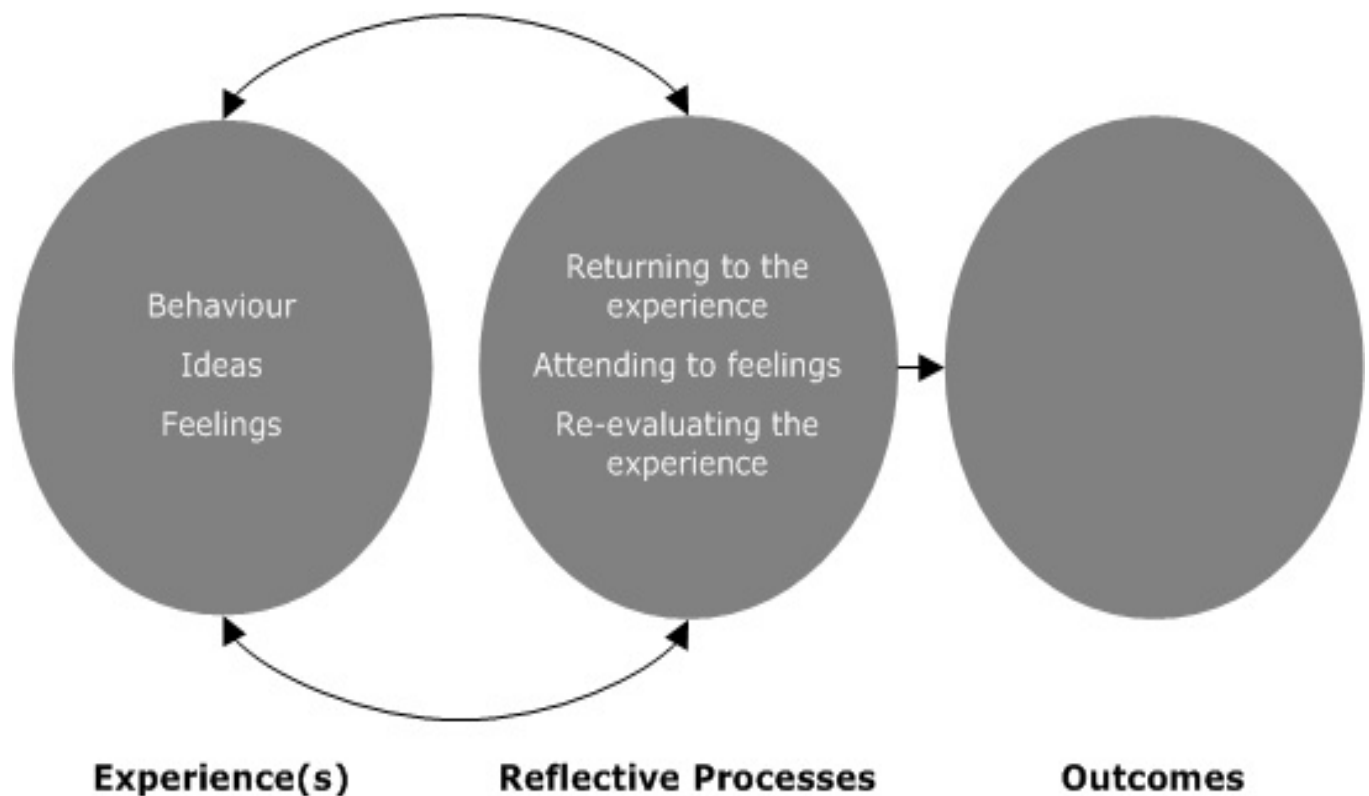


The first stage of the learning process in Boud et al.'s model is the experience itself. In any activity, the learner will:

1. perform actions which can collectively be described as their **behaviour**
2. have **ideas** and implement some of these, rejecting others
3. experience different **feelings** and emotions throughout

The simple act of experiencing something, whether it is new or not, does not necessarily result in any learning. In order for that to happen, an individual needs to go through a reflective process.

2. Reflective processes



An individual will often unconsciously take themselves through a reflective process. However, the most effective learning occurs when the individual uses an intentional, structured process. Boud, Keogh and Walker highlight three key processes for effective learning by reflection:

Returning to the experience

This is the act of mentally replaying the important events in order to understand exactly what happened. The learner should honestly and accurately describe to themselves what occurred. For example, an individual may decide to:

- revisit a written journal or (b)log of the events, taking care to remove emotive language, focussing on the description of actions rather than feelings
- describe the events to a third party, someone not involved directly in the experience such as a mentor or coach

Attending to feelings

While feelings and emotions can offer an important source of learning they can also be a barrier to effective learning. The authors recommend that the learner first focuses on the positive feelings about the experience. This may involve:

- consciously recalling good experiences
- paying attention to the pleasant aspects of the environment
- anticipating the potential benefits to be gained from processing the events

In order to consider events in a rational way, it is important that the learner acknowledges any negative feelings that they have and removes them as a barrier. This can be done by:

- expressing and describing those feelings when talking about the event to others
- writing about the negative feelings in a journal or (b)log

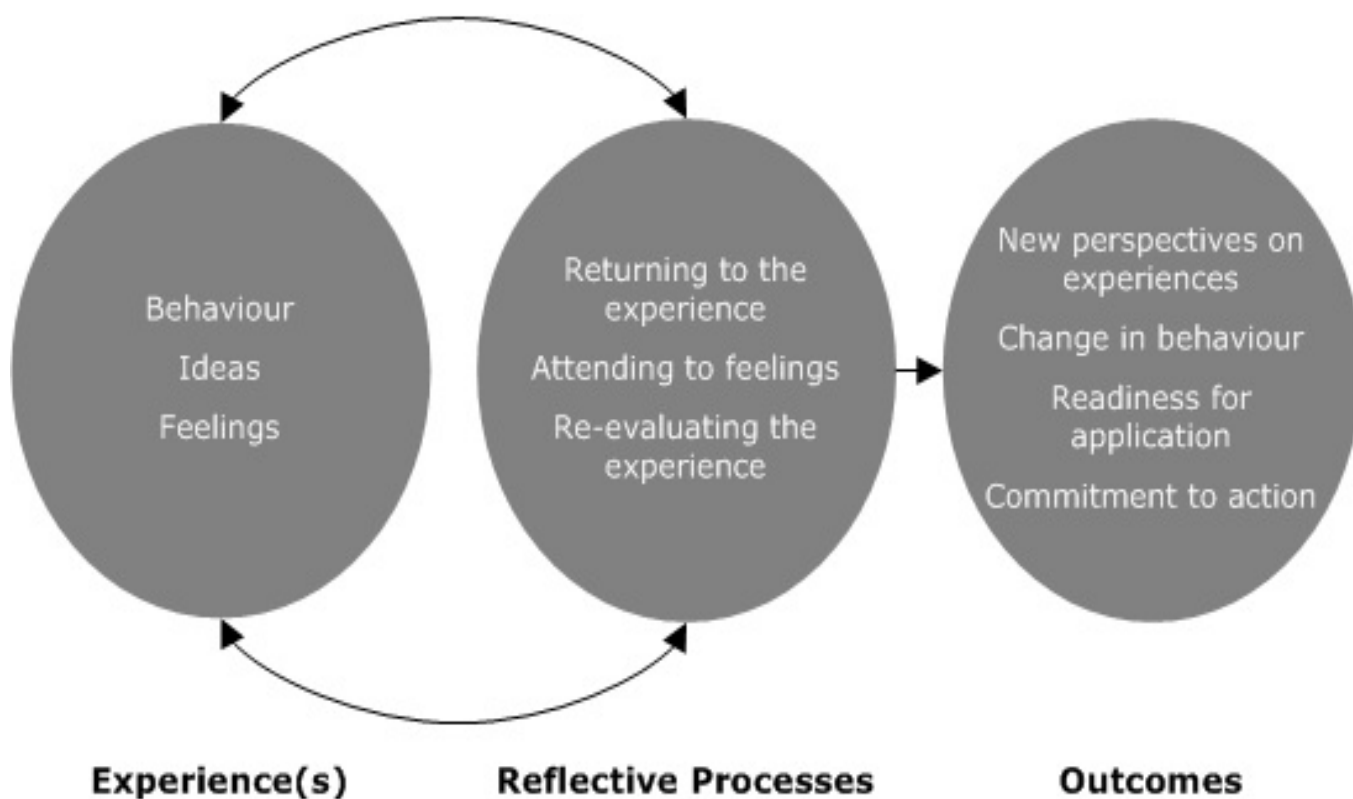
The act of articulating the feelings helps the learner to see them from a more rational viewpoint, removing them as an obstacle to learning.

Re-evaluating the experience

Boud, Keogh and Walker recommend using a variety of techniques to re-evaluate the experience.

- **Association** involves the learner connecting the ideas and feelings from the experience to existing knowledge. For example, the learner may come to realise that an experience they have had recently at work is similar to one they are familiar with from a previous social situation.
- **Integration** is the act of identifying any patterns and relationships between the new experience and previous experiences. In the example above, the learner may have noticed that they had more success with the strategy they used in the social situation and believe that the strategy could also be used in a work environment.
- **Validation** describes the process the learner uses to determine how well-founded their new ideas are. Depending on the nature of the idea, this may involve them mentally rehearsing their ideas, or simply discussing them with someone whose opinion the learner trusts.
- **Appropriation** involves the learner adopting their new learning in real life. They will try out new concepts or strategies and, if successful, these will become part of their natural behaviour. For example, following a poor sales meeting, an individual might, after reflection, conclude that they did not ask enough probing questions at the start of the meeting. After deciding that it would be best to spend longer asking probing questions in all sales meetings, this behaviour will soon become natural to them over a period of time.

3. Outcomes



The objective of reflection is to prepare an individual for new experiences. The validation and appropriation processes of re-evaluating an experience will automatically generate outcomes. These outcomes will sometimes have little impact on the learner, while others will lead to significant improvements in performance. Some possible outcomes of reflecting on an experience include:

- **New perspectives** on experiences such as the clarification of an issue or the removal of a limiting belief.
- A **change in behaviour** such as a new approach to a situation or the development of a new skill.
- **Readiness for application** of new ideas and skills – the reflective process helps the individual prepare to put these ideas and skills into action. By mentally rehearsing, the learner is more prepared to take real action.
- **Commitment to action** – the process of reflection ensures that many barriers to the implementation of new approaches are removed. However, it is important that the learner commits to change. The only point where the reflective process actually ends is when the learner finally acts.

Conclusion

Boud, Keogh and Walker are quick to highlight that the elements of reflection are not as clearly defined as they are in their model. There is a significant overlap between the three stages of going through the experience, the reflective process itself and the outcomes of that process. However, what is clear is that a structured, intended approach to reflection is far more effective and valuable than the changes we make unintentionally as the result of our experiences.

[1] David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, David Walker, *Reflection: Turning Experience Into Learning* (Kogan Page, 1985).

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