

Chapter 12

Critical reflection

Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- understand what is meant by critical reflection and appreciate its challenges and benefits for academic study and professional practice
- understand how to undertake critical reflection and decide on the most appropriate approaches for your purposes
- formulate your own model of critical reflection
- understand the difference between phase 1 and phase 2 reflection
- know how to relate theory to practice
- recognise good and bad critical reflection
- understand how to present critical reflection to others, especially for academic assessment

Introduction

It is easy to become caught up in everyday routine such that we lose sight of the reasons for thinking, feeling, believing and acting as we do. Diverse aspects of our experiences and emotional responses – and our interpretations of these – can become entangled in ways that may not be apparent to us. This can distort our perspective and block understanding, which isn't helpful to us in the longer term.

Critical reflection is used increasingly in professional and academic contexts as a means of focusing our attention back onto our own experience. Reflection in this context refers to specific kinds of mental discipline. It involves clarifying our thinking, deepening understanding and reinforcing learning in ways that, ideally, lead to transformation and change.

Although 'reflection' sounds as though it should be easy, in practice, there is a great deal of challenge in working with the raw material of our experience, and especially in doing so with integrity, in ways that support learning, and doing all this within a framework of academic conventions.

This chapter helps you to understand what is required when undertaking critical reflection for academic and professional purposes. It provides structures that can help you to negotiate the various phases and processes of critical reflection, from initial selection of a topic through to presentation of your reflection for assessment.

What is critical reflection?

More than just 'thinking'

In everyday language, the term 'reflection' is used loosely to refer to:

- being engaged in thought;
- vague musings or day dreaming;
- going back over an event in our minds.

Critical reflection for academic and professional purposes is different from this. It is structured, focused and conscious, with the end purpose of developing our understanding. If you undertake critical reflection as a requirement of your programme or profession, there are likely to be expectations about the form this takes and how to present it.

Critical reflection: Characteristics

There isn't a single kind of critical reflection, but typical characteristics include:

- 1 **Selection:** select an aspect of experience, learning or professional practice for analysis.
- 2 **Changing perspective:** analyse experience from different angles and different levels of detail.
- 3 **Returning to experience:** once, periodically, or frequently, as best fits the issue.
- 4 **Analysis of own role:** look at reasons for, and consequences of, your own actions, rather than those of others.
- 5 **Drawing on received wisdom:** make use of theory, research, professional knowledge.
- 6 **Deepening your understanding:** look actively for meaning, recognising what is significant, and learning from this.
- 7 **Using insights to effect change:** use your new understanding to do things differently in the future – ideally to the benefit of others as well as yourself.

These are examined in more detail below.

'Actions' in this context refers to all salient behaviours, speech, feelings and thoughts, including such matters as body language, assumptions that influence behaviour, and failure to take action.

1 Selection

Effective critical reflection is an intensive activity that takes time, mental energy and often, too, emotional energy. Realistically, you won't be able to bring the same level of critical analysis to all areas of your experience. Select one or two areas where that kind of investment of your resources will bring the best returns for you. See pages 192 and 203.

2 Changing perspective

In our everyday routine, we tend to observe our actions from a given perspective and level of detail, referring mainly to our own opinions. It would be difficult to function on a day-to-day basis if we didn't do so. For critical reflection, we look to develop understanding partly by altering our focus, using different levels of detail from those employed on an everyday basis – as if zooming in and out with a camera lens to see surroundings with fresh eyes.

Analysing in detail

This means putting our experiences under a magnifying lens so as to identify component parts and contributing factors. For example, by clarifying an exact sequence of events, we might identify potential causes and effects overlooked at the time. Alternatively, we might recall things that we said or did that did not seem significant at the time but which take on new meaning when we reconsider the context, our motivations or anxieties. We can use these observations to elicit patterns and themes.

What is critical reflection? (continued)

Considering the bigger picture

This means standing back to look at our experience from broader perspectives, as if through a wide-angle lens:

- actively searching out themes or patterns within our reflections;
- testing our personal experience against published theories, research and professional knowledge;
- considering the influence of broader political, social or ideological contexts.

3 Returning to experience

The appropriate timing and frequency will depend on what you want to gain from your critical reflection. You could select:

A significant, one-off, incident to analyse in detail, to help understand better what happened and your own role and reactions.

A recurrent situation to reflect on after each occurrence, so that you build your observations, your sense of potential cause and effect, and of your own role.

An issue or theme, and return to this at frequent and regular intervals so that you can identify patterns in your actions and emotional responses over time.

A particular project or challenge, and record your observations and reflections over its duration. Draw conclusions about your own role and actions, the reasons for these, their consequences for the project, yourself or others, and for future action.

4 Analysis of your own role

Critical reflection requires you to look at your own experience – it is not intended to be an occasion to blame others or focus on their actions. Depending on the context, this means looking at such aspects as:

- the impact or consequences of what you did or didn't do – and why;

- the reasons for your actions, moving beyond superficial and immediate reasons to look at latent fears and motivations, displaced emotions, assumptions you had made, and whether these helped or hindered the situation;
- changes in the way you acted or responded over time.

5 Drawing on received wisdom

For critical reflection in academic contexts, you are expected to relate your own experience to theory. Ways of doing this are addressed on page 194.

6 Deepening your understanding

Critical reflection is more than detailed observation or a narrative of events. It involves active working with the raw material of your experience so as to make sense of situations and events, their dynamics, your own role within them and the influence of the broader context. This means sifting through your reflections, selecting key insights and identifying why these are of significance to your performance in study or work, the way you work with others, or your life generally.

7 Using insights to effect change

A key aim of critical reflection is to transform the way you see the world, or an aspect of it, such that you think and act differently. Change of some kind is an implicit aim: this may be a small change but one that will make a difference to you or others. It often means owning responsibility for one's own role in contributing to events, which can be challenging but also liberating. At its best, reflection can have a transformative quality, with a profound effect upon your being and sense of self, others and the world around you.

Why engage in critical reflection?

Challenges of critical reflection

Although we may be aware that we would benefit from putting time aside for reflection, it is not easy for most of us to do so. It takes commitment and discipline because of the following factors.

- *Distractions*: There are usually more compelling things to distract us.
- *Confusion*: We may confuse everyday, unfocused 'thoughtfulness' with the more purposeful and structured critical reflection required.
- *Feelings*: If we select difficult material, this can bring its own challenges such as uncomfortable feelings, unexpected emotional responses, or unwanted conclusions about our own role – it is natural to want to evade these.
- *Skills*: It takes skill to balance a critique of experience with the requirements of academic writing, especially relating to the personal and the theoretical.

It can help to know that these challenges are not unusual. Managing such challenges forms part of the purpose of undertaking critical reflection – and contributes to the sense of achievement.

The benefits of critical reflection

A helpful mental discipline

Critical reflection develops a mental discipline that brings diverse and often unexpected benefits – potentially the transformative results referred to above. Academic or professional requirements for critical reflection are helpful in that they provide an external incentive, and often a framework, that we may otherwise lack for undertaking such in-depth analysis.

The more we create a routine for critical reflection, the more we gain in terms of self-management, critical observation, emotional maturity, and in actively using experience to the benefit of ourselves and others.

Space and time for development

When we commit ourselves to critical reflection, we need to create appropriate conditions, such as making the right mental and emotional space and focusing on ourselves in ways that we wouldn't do otherwise. It helps us organise our time and enables different types of thinking.

More effective study and learning

You can use your own learning as the focus of critical reflection. Stepping back from study, you can benefit from reflecting on your attitudes to learning, your strategies, the effectiveness of these for different subject matter, and what assists or prevents you from achieving well.

You can better understand your own performance through looking critically at:

- your educational history and its impact on achievement and self-belief;
- how your current attitudes and study strategies evolved, and whether these best fit your current context;
- whether your self-perceptions assist or hinder your performance;
- whether, unconsciously, you sabotage your own performance;
- if you wish to pursue this in more depth, a wide range of materials are available in *Skills for Success – Personal Development and Employability* (Cottrell 2015).

To support professional practice

Critical reflection enriches professional practice. By developing your understanding of what you are doing and why, and the consequences of your actions, you are better placed to manage new and unexpected situations in a professional manner that also supports your own needs. This is explored in more detail on pp. 205–6.

Decide your approach and purpose

Because of the challenges identified above, it can be difficult to:

- get started on a piece of critical reflection;
- keep going with it once started;
- give shape to your reflective thinking so that it becomes meaningful;
- come back to it over time to see what it is really telling you;
- work with your reflective material productively and creatively so that you can learn from the experience and use it.

Some people generate their best reflective thinking by working in impromptu ways, using the moment, and letting the creative flow direct their thoughts. If this is true of you, then go with what works best for you. In that case, you may not need to use a formal approach until you come to shape your final reflective summary for an external audience.

However, for many people, especially those for whom critical reflection is a relatively new activity or one for which they need encouragement to keep going, it is easier to use a more structured approach. This gives a starting point and direction and helps you to produce stronger, more focused critical reflection.

In general, if you spend time early on elaborating what you wish to gain from your critical reflection and the approach you will take to best achieve that outcome, then you are likely to reap benefits in terms of the quality of your reflection and effective use of your time. This chapter outlines some key considerations for formulating your approach.



Reflection: What is your style?

How could you produce better critical reflection by:

- Working in a freer, creative way?
- Using a structured approach?

Deciding on an approach

Key considerations are:

- 1 purpose;
- 2 type of desired outcome;
- 3 focus;
- 4 model of reflection to employ;
- 5 your methodology;
- 6 audience;
- 7 relating experience and theory.

These are examined in detail below.

1 Identify your purpose

Start by deciding what it is that you want to achieve from undertaking this reflection – in terms of knowledge, understanding or performance. For example, for particular aspects of your study, life or work, you might want to understand:

- why something went well, and whether the lessons learnt could apply to other situations;
- why a particular situation arose or unfolded the way it did;
- why things don't seem to work out as you hoped or expected;
- why your contributions to seminars or at work aren't as effective as you would wish;
- why you think or react the way you do in particular circumstances.

Once you are clear about your purpose, it is easier to decide on other aspects of your approach, such as the expected outcomes, an appropriate focus, your methods and the model to use.

Approach: Outcome, focus, model, method

2 Decide on type of outcome

Before you start your reflections, consider how you will make use of them. This will help you to decide the form that you want your conclusions to take, such as:

- A list of lessons learnt?
- A critical, analytical piece of writing based on your reflections?
- Recommendations for personal action?
- Guidelines for future action?
- Instructions for future action?
- A combination of these?

If you are undertaking reflection as a requirement of your programme of study or professional practice, you may be given guidance about how to write up these outcomes.



Reflection: Outcomes

- What kinds of outcomes are expected for the reflection you are expected to undertake for your programme or profession?

4 Choose a model of reflection

There are various models of reflection that you can draw upon to provide a framework for your reflection – though this isn't always required or necessary. Particular frameworks may be preferred within your discipline or professional area. If not, you may find it helpful to draw upon one or more of the models outlined on pp. 201–4.



Reflection: Using a model for reflection

- Is a particular model of reflection recommended for your course or professional area?
- Do you feel that using a model to structure your reflections would stimulate helpful reflections, or do you feel using a model would stifle your creativity?

5 Method

There isn't a single method of critical reflection. You need to consider:

- whether there is a required methodology for your discipline;
- if you have a choice, the method that will help you engage most effectively.

The following considerations may help you to select what will work best for you.

How best to record your reflections?

For your purposes, would it be better to record your initial reflections on paper, in a notebook, blog or electronic record? Would you prefer to record them digitally?

Approach: Method and audience

With whom?

In relation to your identified purpose, are you likely to develop your deepest insights if you do this entirely on your own, or if you use a colleague, friend or peer group to open up your thinking?

Frequency and regularity?

For the purpose and outcomes you have identified, would it be better to undertake critical reflection on a weekly basis, or more or less frequently? Would you gain most by planning specific times each day, week or month, or making notes as and when there are new developments for you to consider?

First steps/prompts?

Consider how you will get started on your reflection. Would you work best by:

- Jotting down your thoughts as they come, and then going back over these for further consideration?
- Using the same set of questions each time, in order to structure your thinking sessions?
- Using a theory as a starting point?
- Discussing an event with a colleague, and then jotting down your thoughts?
- Applying a model of reflection in a systematic way on each occasion?
- Using a pro-forma to guide your reflection?

Working the material

Your initial reflections will generally provide raw material, or phase 1 reflections, that will require further work. Consider when and how you will work with your initial reflections so as to arrive at deeper understandings through phase 2 reflection (pp. 198 and 200).

End-point

Consider how you will draw your thoughts together towards conclusions. What format will this take? For example, you may be required to submit a blog that contains your developing ideas, and a piece of reflective writing that draws together key insights and conclusions.



Reflection: Methodology

- Which aspects of your methodology do you think you need to develop the most?
- How will you go about this?

6 Audience

If you are undertaking critical reflection for your own purposes, then you can decide on the format it takes. However, if you are required to share it with a tutor, peers, work supervisor, assessors, or others, consider how you will adapt your written account in order to take your future audience into consideration.

This may include:

- using different content and styles of writing for phases 1 and 2 (see pp. 198–200);
- including only information and reflections that you are comfortable for others to read;
- providing a well-structured and referenced critical summary;
- ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for anyone referred to in reflections – and permission to use workplace material.



Reflection: Confidentiality

- What kinds of information would you not feel comfortable sharing with your peers, tutors or others?
- What kinds of confidentiality issues are there in general for the kinds of reflection you might be asked to undertake for your course?

Approach: Relating experience and theory

7 Relating theory and practice

For critical reflection on experience for academic work, you are expected to relate experience to received wisdom or 'theory'. You can approach this in different ways, some of which are listed below.

Check the research basis first

When selecting an area of experience for critical consideration, choose an aspect for which you know there is published research. Ideally, there should be research findings that support different theoretical perspectives. If not, it may create difficulties when you come to write up your reflections for assessment. It is much harder to undertake reflection and then start looking for relevant theory and research.

Update yourself on the issues

Investigate the research findings and accepted professional practice for the area you have selected for reflection. Read reputable journals or recently published books on the subject, and find out what key issues are being addressed in that area. What are the 'hot topics'?

Ensure that you are aware of:

- established and new theories related to 'hot topics' or to other areas that you want to investigate through your critical reflection;
- research that supports these;
- any criticisms of that research;
- the direction of debate on these issues within your subject discipline or profession.

In this respect, your background reading will be similar to that undertaken for other kinds of academic work.

Do your experiences support the theory?

Consider when and how your own experiences match or do not match what you would expect from the key theories you have selected to draw upon. If there isn't a good match, consider the reasons for this, such as differences that there might be in the context or data. What is true of one situation may not be the case in your own.

Do theories support your findings?

It is possible that you will develop insights or draw conclusions on matters that were not covered in the initial research items that you used. If so, investigate whether there are theories or research findings that support or contradict what you have found. It adds weight to your own position if you can relate your conclusions to a broader research base. Research into the broader social, political and cultural issues may also help.

Learn from the experts

Use reputable sources of research and their conclusions in order to throw light onto areas of practice or study that you find difficult. Consider what these sources offer you in identifying ways of doing things differently. For example, theories of how memory works may help you in preparing for exams.

Your analysis and your consideration of salient theories should help you to understand better:

- what has been happening up to now and why;
- why you, personally, act as you do and the impact of your actions;
- how wider issues impact upon the everyday and the individual;
- how you can act differently so as to bring about different outcomes.

Decide your approach: Summary

Aspect	Decide ...
Purpose	What is it that you want to understand or do better as a result of this reflection?
Type of outcome	When you look back over your reflections to draw out conclusions, what form do you want or need these to take? For example: ● A list of lessons learnt? ● Recommendations for personal action? ● Guidelines for action? ● Instructions on applying what you have learnt?
Focus	What will provide a meaningful focus for your reflection (a particular incident, recurring issue, concern, set of relationships, etc.) that you consider relevant to achieving your purpose above? What makes it worth the time and emotional effort to focus on this?
Model of reflection	● Are you expected to apply a particular model of reflection? If not, would adopting or adapting an existing model help you to structure your reflection? ● Would it help to design your own model?
Method	How will you go about your reflection – if you have a choice? ● <i>Recording</i>: On paper, in a notebook, blog or electronic record? ● <i>With whom</i>: Individually? With a colleague or peer? In a group? ● <i>Frequency</i>: Weekly? Daily? As needed? A one-off reflection? ● <i>When</i>: As a daily log or blog? At a particular time of day? ● <i>First steps/prompts</i>: How will you get started on your reflection (see phase 1 reflections on pp. 198–9)? Would it help to use free association? Using a series of questions or a pro-forma to provide structure? Using a theory as a starting point? Comparing and contrasting with another example? ● <i>Evolution</i>: How will you develop your initial reflections (see phase 2 reflection, p. 208)? ● <i>End-point</i>: How will you draw your thoughts together towards a conclusion?
Theory	● Which theories or research are you going to draw on to bring insight and more depth to your reflection? ● How will you go about relating experience and theory? ● Are there broader social, political, cultural, ideological, economic or technological issues that you could research that would provide helpful additional perspectives?
Audience	If your written reflection will be seen by peers, tutors or others, how will you adapt it to achieve the following? ● Make the key points stand out? ● Ensure confidentiality? ● Ensure you are reasonably comfortable with them seeing any personal information or reading about personal feelings?

An outline copy of this summary is provided below. You can copy this and complete it for your work if you would find this helpful.

Resource: Outline approach to reflection

Use the table on page 195 to guide your own approach to the reflection you need to undertake. Write your decisions about your approach, using the right-hand boxes, below



Aspect	Decision
Purpose (p. 191)	<i>What I want to understand better (and why this is significant):</i>
Type of outcome wanted? (p.192)	<i>Conclusions, recommendations, critical observations, personal guidelines, etc.?</i>
Focus (p. 192)	<i>Area of experience to focus on:</i> <i>How would this focus be useful in achieving my purpose?</i>
Model (p. 192 and pp. 201–5)	<i>I will/won't be drawing on a formal model of reflection because ...</i> <i>The model I will use is:</i>

Resource: Outline approach to reflection (continued)

Aspect	Decision
Method (p. 193)	<i>With whom:</i> <i>Frequency:</i> <i>When:</i> <i>First steps/prompts:</i> <i>Evolution (working with your reflective material).</i> <i>End-point:</i>
Theory (p. 194)	<i>Which theoretical perspectives and approaches I am going to draw upon:</i>
Audience (p. 193)	<i>To help the reader, I will organise the writing up of these reflections by ...</i> <i>Confidentiality issues I need to address and how I will do so:</i>

Reflection phases 1 and 2

The process of reflection can be considered in terms of two distinct phases;

- Phase 1: Generating ideas and raw content;
- Phase 2: Analysis and synthesis.

Phase 1: Generating ideas and raw content

First-phase reflection refers to jotting down reflections when the details, thoughts and emotions are still fresh, recording these as a stream of initial thoughts. These might be captured in a notebook, file, blog, digital recording or whatever best suits your way of working.

Characteristics of phase 1

- Immediate: written whilst still fresh in the mind.
- Chronological: written 'as it happens' so it may read as an unfolding story.
- Emotional: it provides a chance to explore your feelings – and more emotion may arise as you identify what was happening for you emotionally and why.
- Detailed: likely to contain information and details that seem relevant at the time but which may become less significant as time goes by.
- Fragmented: different things will appear to be significant at different times.

Phase 2: Analysis and synthesis

It is this aspect of reflection that brings depth to your thinking and learning. It is most likely to be phase 2 reflections that are assessed or gain the most marks. It should be clear how phase 2 reflections relate to your phase 1 reflections. In effect, you consider both the issue and yourself in relation to the issue.

Characteristics of phase 2

- Holistic: you are looking back over an experience, event or project *as a whole*.
- Distance: you stand back to gain perspective. For example, you look at the feelings that were evoked without becoming caught up in them to the same extent.
- Analytical: you analyse your reflections critically.
- Synthesis: you bring together disparate and scattered thoughts and analyses into more rounded judgements and conclusions.
- Extrapolation: you are engaged in a process of teasing out meaning, insights and significance.

At phase 2, you work with your reflections as a whole, looking for significant trends, patterns and conclusions. You may benefit both from sitting quietly with these for a while to see what further thoughts emerge, and also from working with them actively, asking questions of yourself, and drawing out the implications of what you have learnt.

Understand yourself in relation to the issue

At both phases, but especially for phase 2, you need to consider your own role and actions, the impact of these at the time or later, and the consequences of these for yourself or others. For example:

- How well did you handle a situation? How good were your decision-making and other skills?
- How did your views and your understanding develop through the process of reflection?
- What difference will your new understanding make to how you approach similar issues in future?
- What further training, research, reflection or support would help you to develop personally and professionally?

Examples of phase 1 reflection

For a project for their degree in medicine, Sophie and Charlotte created a resource to help parents and carers communicate with young children about cancer. They each completed a weekly reflective log. The following examples from their logs illustrate the flavour and range of phase 1 reflection.

Their feelings as they undertook new tasks and stretched existing skills

I am slightly worried about my computer abilities and unsure how to create professional looking graphics which could be used in the resource ...

Evaluations of their current experience

My experience of dealing with bereavement in children is minimal and it is an area that I feel I will have to research in order to help me develop a greater understanding.

Their feelings about dealing with such a sensitive and difficult issue

Although I was excited about the prospect of filling this apparent need and helping parents, I was also anxious about tackling a major topic such as cancer.

Meetings with the tutor

We arrived at the first session with ideas which we had created individually, with a view to discussing these and narrowing them down to create a specific project brief. I felt apprehensive prior to the meeting as both my partner and I were coming up with individual ideas and had not agreed a direction for the project. After ... I felt less anxious about the project.

The research they undertook

... we found many study and journal articles, mainly from the BMJ, which focused directly on this issue. This encouraged me to proceed ... as initially I was concerned that there would not be much literature for us to base our research on or to indicate that this would be a worthy project. My experience of dealing with bereavement in children is minimal and it is an

area that I will have to research in order to help me develop a greater understanding.

Their responses to their reading

I was shocked to read that many parents put off telling their children about cancer. As a result, children find out themselves through overhearing conversations and finding leaflets around the house.

Lessons they learnt as they went along

I was taken aback when I realised that producing visually appealing cards was not the main aim of the project. This was slightly disheartening as I was looking forward to [that] ... I then began to understand that the thought process, rationale and development of ideas were more important than creating storyboard cards. With hindsight, it perhaps would have been more useful if [we] had decided on a specific idea ... prior to the meeting.

How their ideas developed week by week

This week we also considered how the resource may not only help children but also individuals themselves ... After looking at the fairytale card game, I realised we had missed many important aspects of the story. We then began to reorganise our ideas more logically ... [and] discovered new ideas ...

Recognising contributions from the team

My partner and I definitely complemented each other in other ways. She had a wider vocabulary ... I was better at ...

Broader social and cultural issues

... religion, language, ethnic origin and family situation. Upon thinking about and discussing this issue, I have realised that ... these differences in culture are likely to result in different methods of coping with bad news and different family situations and support networks. All these need to be thought about and addressed in our resource ...

Examples of phase 2 reflection

Sophie and Charlotte drew together their learning in a reflective summary and project report which drew upon, and developed, selections of material recorded in their weekly logs. Some examples are given below. This phase 2 reflection synthesised their reflections, drawing together:

- how their thinking developed, and the effects of this on their project;
- how they made use of research;
- the broader lessons they learnt;
- changes to the way they viewed their future professional roles as doctors.

How and why their assumptions and goals changed over time

Reflecting back to the beginning of the project, I had fixated in my mind that I wanted to create a resource that looked professional and useable ... this initial aim actually hindered me from thinking more deeply about the concept behind the cards ... I slowly realised that ... the cards did not have to look aesthetically perfect – the more important element was what the card represented.

Research that informed their thinking

Barnes et al. (2000) stated that most of the mothers included in their trial of breast cancer ... were not offered any advice on how to break the news to their children. Many stated that they would have welcomed this opportunity. ... This is also supported by Kroll et al. which states that research is needed to aid physicians and parents as to what age-appropriate information to give children and at what stage of the disease.

How they learnt from past personal experiences

I have also been forced to revisit some issues which I learnt about during my mother's illness. ... The fact that this project has reminded me of those issues ... has helped me greatly in thinking through some of the topics which need to be addressed in our resource in order for me to help others.

The deeper lessons extrapolated

I think one of the most important aspects that I take away from this project is the effect of cancer not merely on the individual but on their whole family and people close to them. I began this project with a scientific knowledge of cancer and its effects, but I take away ... an insight into how cancer changes people's lives.

Before this project, I had never considered ... that different family set-ups can affect the way in which we cope and rely on people. Your culture definitely has a huge impact upon the way you view and deal with disease and adversity. I think that as a doctor, it is vital to bear this in mind and adapt your advice accordingly.

Personal awareness and change

From completing this work for the resource pack, it has made me very aware of a lot of cultural influences which direct me to choosing a certain type of image. I have never before thought about the fact that a picture I might choose to represent a certain issue could convey a completely different meaning to someone from a different culture than me. I think it is important that I have learnt about this as it will make me think twice about using certain images or words in the future.

Suggested changes for the profession and the reasons for doing so

I also think ... we have identified an important fact, that clinicians should look into increased involvement with their patient's family ... it is greatly appreciated by patients and their families. This will have a knock on effect ... as they may feel more comfortable coming to you with subsequent problems ... [with] medical benefit as it can allow for the problem to be addressed and treated earlier, both minimising the effect on the patient and reducing cost and time for the NHS.

Whether a patient is at home or in hospital it is a doctor's duty to ensure that they have enough information and resources about their cancer. [Otherwise] people are more likely to put off telling their children about their cancer ...

Models of reflection

What is a model of reflection?

Models provide frameworks that can assist and structure the process of reflection. From a practical perspective, models of reflection vary in complexity, depending on how many steps, or stages, they use to break down the process of reflecting on experience, and how many prompts or cues they provide as potential memory joggers for each stage.

The underlying concept

Reflective models share three basic assumptions. These are that we can:

- 1 think back over our experiences;
- 2 understand them at a deeper level; and
- 3 use that understanding to do things differently in the future – that is, to effect change through learning.

Staged models

Stages present a nominal order for considering different aspects of an experience. Each stage serves as a useful reference point, prompting a different approach to working with an experience. In practice, you are likely to move fluidly between these stages and to include material not covered explicitly by them.

Three-stage model

There are various three-stage models, such as Borton (1970) and Driscoll (1994), that, in essence, simplify the reflective process to:

- 1 What?
- 2 So what?
- 3 Now what?

These map onto the basic assumptions described above broadly as follows.

- 1 *What?* Go back over the experience and identify what happened.
- 2 *So what?* Describing your experience is not enough – you need to work out why this is significant. What do you now understand better?

- 3 *Now what?* Now that you have a better understanding of your experience, what will you do with the insights gained? How will you be different? Or do things differently?

Multi-stage models

It is a complex process to work usefully with experience so as to learn from it. There are many potential components, from identifying what is relevant, exploring personal feelings and understanding other people's perspectives, through to the insights gained from research findings, or a consideration of sociological, political or other dimensions.

Any of the above components, and others, could be extracted for particular emphasis. This could be framed either as a distinct 'stage' within the model or as a distinct set of prompts. For example, Gibbs (1988) provides a model that includes a separate stage on feelings, whereas other models such as Boud et al. (1985) do not, but build consideration of feelings throughout the reflective process.

Prompt-based models

Johns and Freshwater (1998) have developed a model that is popular for professional practice in nursing. This provides prompt questions that relate, broadly, to five different ways of knowing:

- Empirical: the tested knowledge base, such as scientific research.
- Personal: knowing how feelings and motivations influence your actions.
- Aesthetic: knowing how to make meaningful, creative, unconscious responses in the moment.
- Ethical: knowing what it is right to do.
- Reflexive: knowing how to apply learning gained from experience.

Deciding on your model for reflection

Before launching into your reflection, consider the following.

Are you required to use a model?

Do you have to draw on a particular a model of reflection for your programme? If so, ensure that you understand its rationale so that you can apply this to your own reflection.

Do you want to use an existing model?

If you have a choice about whether you apply a reflective model, consider whether you would find it helpful to draw on one that already exists, to help give structure to your approach and thinking. If so, research the various alternatives available. The references on page 210 provide a good starting place.

Would you prefer to design your own model?

Alternatively, you can design your own model. The advantages of designing your own model are not only that this should better fit your own purposes and circumstances, but that you also gain practice in planning reflective activity. You could also design your own model through active, critical engagement with existing models. This would deepen your understanding of what critical reflection is about.

Designing your own reflective model

Your own model can be as simple or as complex as you find helpful for motivating you and generating deep and useful reflection. You may wish to adapt your model depending on how well it works for you.

Concept

You would need to take on board the underlying concept outlined on page 201.

Characteristics

You would need to ensure your model addressed the characteristics of reflection outlined on page 188.

Adapting a staged model

You can adapt an existing model to suit you. Consider whether you work better with a small number of overarching stages or with additional stages that draw your attention to areas that are significant to you or your subject discipline or profession. You could adapt either the three-stage model (page 201) or the Core Model (Cottrell, 2010) outlined on page 203. Alternatively, investigate other models and adapt one of those.

Prompts

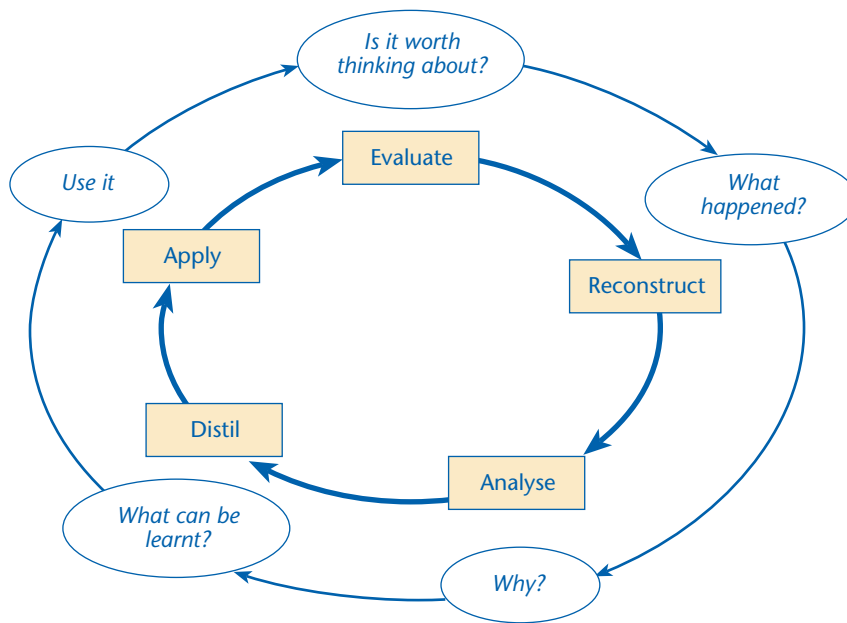
Consider whether you would benefit from a list of questions to serve as prompts for each stage of your model. Listing these can help you to decide what it is that you really want to address through your reflection. If you wish to use the Core Model for reflection (page 203), you can build from the prompts provided there. Alternatively, a fuller list of prompts is available in *Skills for Success* (Cottrell, 2015).

Name the stages and the model

Naming the stages of your model helps to make it your own. On a practical level, it also helps to clarify whether the stages are distinct and likely to work well together. It will be easier for you to recall the stages whenever you undertake your reflection.

Once you have named your stages, the distinctive character of your model should be clearer to you. Give your model a name that reflects this.

The Core Model for critical reflection



Source: Stella Cottrell (2010).

Core Model: Stages and prompts

The Core Model for critical reflection consists of five stages, with question-based prompts to support each of these (Cottrell, 2015). You can adapt, select from or delete these stages. You can add further stages if you feel that a particular prompt or set of prompts merits separate attention, either for your own purpose or because these are especially important in your discipline. The five stages are described below.

1 Evaluate

The kind of critical reflection described in this chapter is, as we have seen, intensive, time-consuming and potentially emotionally demanding; you need to select a focus. Given the demands that it makes upon you, it is worth

spending time critically reflecting upon your choice and the direction that you are taking. As this is so important, the first stage of your reflection is a critically evaluative one, examining your purpose and focus and deciding whether these will really yield the best results.

Examples of prompts useful for this stage

- Does this provide enough challenge and material – or have I gone for too easy an option?
- Is this too challenging? Am I too angry or affected by this to address it at this time or as part of an academic assignment?
- Am I ever likely to be in a similar situation again? If not, what will I gain from focusing on it now?

The Core Model for critical reflection (continued)

2 Reconstruct

Each time we go over an event in a reflective way, the account is likely to vary. That is why this stage is referred to as 'reconstruction'. This is typical phase 1 reflective activity. We are putting together, again, the events, feelings, details as we now recall them. Going over an event in detail can bring up unexpected reminders or draw attention to items that we may not have noticed previously.

Input from others about the event, or perspectives gained from our reading about the subject, may lead us to reconstruct the event in a slightly different way with different aspects coming to the forefront or gaining a new emphasis or significance. If we write these down and return to them, the differences between one account and another may strike us as significant.

Examples of prompts useful for this stage

- What was I aiming to achieve through my actions, what I said, or what I didn't do or say?
- Did this work out as I expected?
- How did I feel when X happened, and how did I respond?

3 Analyse

Examine your reflective materials, your thoughts or your notes, from different angles; interrogate your material; answer your prompt questions; compare your emerging findings with those expected from your reading or training; question whether you are really confronting your own motivations and taking on board the difficult messages; take a walk; talk to a peer about what you are finding; jot down new thoughts; sleep on them; sit quietly with your reflections; go back over everything again. In other words, work with your material in many ways, so as to encourage fresh insights to emerge.

Examples of prompts useful for this stage

- Which actions or omissions were most significant in the way events unfolded?
- What were the consequences of unexpected or difficult feelings?
- What interpretations or theories help to make sense of what happened?
- Were there deeper roots to this than were apparent at the time?

4 Distil

If your analysis helped to make sense of your experience, then it should be a relatively easy next step to draw out the lessons learnt. Your analysis may have generated many thoughts, of different levels of significance. Draw out the most relevant and synthesise these into a workable set of key ideas or conclusions.

Examples of prompts useful for this stage

- What worked well that I could use again in the future?
- What were the trigger points? How would I manage those differently?
- How does my way of approaching matters or thinking about them help or hinder the desired outcome?

5 Apply

If you have really arrived at new understandings and drawn lessons for yourself, then the logical next step is to consider how you will make use of that learning before you forget it. This may mean that you need to bring others on board so that they understand why you want to do things differently, and are prepared to support you.

Examples of prompts useful for this stage

- To what kinds of situations will I apply these insights?
- What support will I need?
- Who else needs to be on board? How will I persuade them of the benefits?

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.

Reflection and professional judgement

Following procedure

In clinical practice and workplace settings, there are usually set procedures and customary working practices that you are required to follow. These have an important function in ensuring that everyone knows what to do, that teams can work together, and that health, safety, security, quality assurance, statutory obligations and other requirements are met.

When procedure isn't enough

However, from time to time, situations arise that make it difficult or inappropriate to follow procedures exactly. This requires you to make a judgement call – sometimes on the spot. Many poor outcomes in the workplace arise because people don't have sufficient understanding of the relation between theory and practice. This means they are unclear:

- when to deviate from procedure;
- what to do in situations where no procedure yet exists;
- how to read a situation so as to make an appropriate decision for action.



John was a stickler for following protocol to the letter.

Making good judgement calls

If you have a good grasp of the knowledge base and working context that underpin everyday practice, you are better able to make a good call when needed. You are more likely to:

- understand why the normal procedure was established;
- understand the assumptions that inform normal procedure;
- be able to identify whether these apply in the current context;
- judge whether the procedure itself can be adapted or over-ruled;
- evaluate what aspects of the normal procedures still need to be met;
- make a decision that meets the requirements of the current situation.

Reflecting on non-routine action

The following prompts can assist you in reflecting on how you act when routine responses may not be appropriate.

- What is the usual course of action in this kind of instance?
- What is the rationale for that routine procedure (i.e. what are the reasons for doing things that way)?
- What was different in this instance such that it was difficult or inappropriate to follow usual procedures?
- Which aspects of procedure had to be adhered to? Why were these essential?
- Which aspects could be adapted or over-ruled? Why is that the case?
- Did you stick to the routine or adapt it? Why was that?
- Did it work well? What were the immediate effects? What were the consequences?
- What, if anything, would you do if this situation arose again?

Good and bad critical reflection

From what you have read already, you will have started to formulate a sense of what constitutes good reflection. The following table highlights the differences between good and poor critical reflection.



Aspect	Good critical reflection	Poor critical reflection
1 Experience	Draws on personal, group or workplace experience as a means of testing out theory or learning new lessons, looking at experiences with a critical eye.	Assumes 'experience' is an end in itself; that one's own experience is typical of others' without good evidence that this is so; that experience equates to 'insight', without bringing a critical eye to it.
2 Personal responsibility	The best critical reflection demonstrates integrity both in focusing on one's personal role, such as the assumptions brought to a situation or actions taken or omitted, and in taking responsibility for the consequences of these.	Poor critical reflection finds ways of deflecting blame onto other people or the context itself for the way events unfolded. Alternatively, personal responsibility is addressed in a superficial way, so that the relation of action to consequence is not considered in depth. It is also poor practice to assume personal responsibility and guilt for matters that are not simply down to oneself.
3 Focus	Selects a focus such as a particular time-period, set of events, specific kinds of incident or examples of interactions.	Rambles around or covers too many dimensions so it isn't clear what is the focus of the reflection.
4 Scale	The focus is broad enough to offer challenge and meaningful insights but can be reasonably explored in the timescale and word limit.	Is either too narrow to provide the insights needed or too broad to look at things in any depth.
5 Direction	However it may start, good critical reflection begins to take direction as the person starts to identify, and then focus on, selected themes for closer attention.	Rambles or hops about rather than finding a direction.
6 Depth	Delves below the surface: it picks up on initial thoughts and insights, analysing these further with the aim of gaining deeper insights or broader applications.	Is superficial. It doesn't demonstrate any interest in burrowing beneath the surface to understand more.
7 Challenge	Usually tackles a difficult area or enters difficult terrain, such as matters that are personally difficult, or issues that are complex and don't lend themselves to easy answers.	Tends to stay within safe territory or deals with difficult issues in a superficial way or doesn't seem to take the person forward in their understanding.
8 Theory	Draws on relevant theoretical standpoints, research, or established professional practice in ways that demonstrate how these have helped understanding. Where relevant, it relates the particular incident to broader social and political issues.	Draws only on the person's own ideas, experiences and anecdotes, or makes superficial passing references to theory and research.

Good and bad critical reflection (continued)

Aspect	Good critical reflection	Poor critical reflection
9 Criticality	Brings a searching, critical eye to the focus of the reflection, to emerging insights, and to any theories or sources of information. This criticality is used to take the person forward in their understanding of the core emerging issues, such as by challenging their own ideas and actions, or showing how their experience supports or challenges existing knowledge.	Is preoccupied mainly with describing situations, content or events. May include critical analysis but this doesn't seem to be used in a way that really develops an understanding of the core emerging issues.
10 Insight	The reflection takes the person forward in their understanding, such that they can make more sense of their situation, work or study, manage better within it, do things differently, apply understandings to new contexts, etc.	The reflection gives little indication that the person has moved forward in their understanding of the context or issue, or self-knowledge.
11 End-points (extrapolated conclusions)	The process of reflection may take the person in many different directions. However, by the end, they have stood back, drawn out the key messages of what they have learnt, and summarised these as conclusions or recommendations.	The reflection reads more as description of a process or rambling free association. The lessons learned are not drawn out clearly as conclusions or recommendations.
12 Audience (if reflection is to be shared)	If this is to be used in academic, work or public contexts, the writing up of reflection demonstrates a sound understanding of ethical considerations and stylistic or academic conventions that may apply. Issues of confidentiality have been addressed appropriately.	The reflection is submitted or made public without all due care being taken to ensure that confidentiality and other data protection issues are addressed; little thought is given to how to make the reflection manageable for others to read.



Reflection: The quality of your critical reflection



Using the table above, consider your own critical reflection.

- What do you think are your areas of strength in producing good critical reflection?
- Which aspects do you need to improve?

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 193 and 208. 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 147–69.

Referring to theory and research

You may have provided an outline of your background research as part of a project report or made reference 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.

Summary

This chapter has looked at critical thinking from a different angle, turning the spotlight onto your own actions. Critical reflection of this kind is used increasingly within both academic and professional contexts.

Critical reflection is challenging, requiring you to analyse your own behaviours and assumptions, relating these to broader perspectives from theory and research and, if relevant, professional practice, and doing this with integrity, even when the material itself may be taxing or reveal your actions in a less than perfect light. In addition, initial reflections need to be sifted, the key lessons extracted and related back to theory and practice, and all this presented to others using the conventions of academic writing. Along the way, it is likely that the material will be personally challenging, probably evoking difficult feelings and emotions which you will need to manage well for yourself and others.

The achievement of good critical reflection can feel elusive. Motivation can be an issue, and it can feel difficult to balance the different aspects in a coherent way. This chapter provides ways of addressing these difficulties. It structures the activity into distinct phases and stages, gives examples so that you can see what is expected, and provides step-by-step methods and practical tools that you can use and adapt for your own critical reflection.

It is not surprising that, if you are successful in bringing together all of the above, you are likely to gain enormously. Those who engage deeply in this process generally find that, within a relatively short time, they move from initial, superficial observations to deep, thoughtful conclusions about themselves, their learning, their professional roles, ways of changing things for the better, and even their way of being in the world.

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