

TRAINER DEVELOPMENT: understanding reflective practice

Reflective practice is more than reviewing what went well and what didn't go well, and what can be done differently or improved

Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal explore the concept of reflective practice and explain why it is a particularly valuable approach for people involved in the training and development profession.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- We learn from success, so we should reflect on what we do that is successful.
- We learn what not to do from failure, so we should do something different.
- The result of our reflection is just theory until tested in a real situation.
- Reflection can result in behaviour change and improvement as a professional.
- Deep reflection can lead to change in our beliefs and values.

Increasingly, the term 'reflective practice' is appearing in the vocabulary of professional development. In this article we will define the concept and explore its benefits and difficulties. We will also consider single-loop and double-loop learning within the application of reflective practice. Additionally, we will go on to explore some strategies for becoming more reflective in practice.

So why is reflective practice of special importance to trainers and developers? Most trainers do not come through an academic curriculum or apprenticeship aimed at producing a qualified trainer. One route is from other professions where the practitioners have become subject matter experts and then start to pass on their professional skills to others in that profession. Another route is from an administrative base either as administrative staff or as specialists within the HR function. We are not suggesting they are not trained in the arts and crafts of training and development (T&D). What we are suggesting is that T&D professionals acquire most of their professional skills through practice. It is the practice of the behaviours that builds the skills. Being a T&D professional is much more than an assembly of skill sets. It has associated goals, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks, mental models and structures. These are not a coherent whole. They vary from professional to professional, from organisation to organisation, and between training specialisms and methodologies.

Most of us in our profession learn what to do from success. After all if we do something and we are successful why on earth would we change what we are doing? Much of what we learn therefore is conditioning. We are given or work out an approach that we put into practice and the responses that we get from the people we are training both consciously and subconsciously moulds our behaviour.

We learn what not to do from mistakes and that tells us we must do something different. We know that traditional wisdom tells us 'we learn from mistakes'; well, we do. We learn we must do something else. If the something else is not successful we may revert or just give up.

If the something else is successful we are more likely to repeat it so we are back to square one: we learn what to do from success. Behaviourist psychologists have been telling us this for decades. See, for example, BF Skinner.

Even though what we are doing is successful there may be a better way. If this is true we may need to think again about what we are doing that is successful and do something else. If we don't try, we won't find out. It follows that real learning involves reflecting and experimenting as the learning cycle developed by DA Kolb tells us. It also requires courage and intellectual capability.

It could be that we think we are doing something, but in fact we are doing something else. So if we think about what we are really doing and it is clear and the explanation reflects the fact, that is reflective practice.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering and critically analysing our actions and own experiences with the goal of improving our professional practice.

Single-loop and double-loop learning

C Argyris and D Schön differentiated between single-loop learning and double-loop learning. For our purposes, single-loop learning is a simple version of the Kolb cycle. Performance is evaluated through reflective practice and then corrected or improved. At the simplest level, reflection on performance gives rise to the recognition for the need of a different operational strategy that will work within the same goal structures, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks and rule boundaries. This is single-loop learning. It is a simple feedback loop, in which modification of the behaviours used in the application follows the consideration of the outcome and reflection on the behaviours that we used to achieve the outcome. In this model the broader environment is taken for granted (see Figure 1, page 42).

A higher order of learning is when we question the whole activity as part of a larger cycle, in which the reflection is about the activity and the assumptions implicit in it. This is referred to as double-loop learning. It is more creative and may lead to changes in the beliefs, values, strategies, rules or consequences related to the performance. Double-loop learning involves critical reflection and an ability to stretch or change the organisational, cultural and self-imposed boundaries (see Figure 2 on page 42).

A continuing sense of unease about the outcome of a situation, having applied new understanding, may mean that the beliefs,

values and mental models we hold are not congruent with our behaviour. We have perhaps reflected in the area of single-loop learning and we may need to tackle the double-loop learning through deeper reflection.

RETURNING TO EXPERIENCE

In essence reflection is an activity in which we 'recapture' our experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. The approach may follow four steps.

Step 1: returning to the experience. This involves recalling and exploring relevant situations and events.

Step 2: relating to our feelings. This has three aspects: using positive feelings, removing negative ones or containing their negative impact on us.

Step 3: re-evaluating experience. This involves examining experience in the light of our goal and existing approaches (and so on).

Step 4: re-learning. This involves reinforcing our effective behaviours and practices or integrating new knowledge into our conceptual framework, displacing previously held knowledge, practice or behaviour.

A word of warning, though ... just because it didn't work here this time does not mean that it won't work in a different situation. This means that reflective practice is a means to expand our repertoire of behaviours. The challenge is to use the correct set in a given situation.

This approach to reflection has the advantage of connecting with the usual way we work. Essentially, in this process our focus is on reflection-on-action. The action has occurred and we are looking back on it.

REFLECTION-ON-ACTION

The reflection in this case is an introspective mental activity, looking back, that excludes both the immediate behavioural

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elements and real-time dialogue with others involved in the activity. As such it is subject to the corruption of memory, self-preservation and distortion of reality. It follows that in the reflection-on-action situation, coaching from a skilled behavioural observer who applies interactive skills to enable us to ground our understanding and identify changes needed is a major asset.

Feedback from participants can be obtained and if they are skilled in behavioural observation this can be of value. Questioning as to how they have used the training may also give us some insights on our effectiveness in helping them to learn. It can also elicit what they found as particularly valuable, so reinforcing particular practices and through reflecting on the behaviours used enable our learning.

A real and illuminating aid is to run a tape recorder when we are training. Be careful of the shock – ‘Did I really say that?’, ‘Why did I misunderstand?’, ‘Oh! That participant made a really good point and I missed it.’ This is returning to experience with nowhere to hide.

The act of reflection-on-action enables us to spend time exploring *why* we acted as we did, *what* was happening in a group, and so on. In so doing we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice.

REFLECTION-IN-ACTION

To some extent we are faced with a problem. We can only reflect on what has already happened, so it can be argued that we are always reflecting on action. If, however, we have the reflection close to the action and consider our behaviour concurrent with the activity we may gain some valuable insights. An example is the skill of listening to ourselves as we speak and observing the responses to those utterances.

If we allow ourselves to experience pleasure, satisfaction, surprise, puzzlement or confusion in a situation in which we find ourselves we can reflect on that situation and on our prior views and beliefs that have been implicit in our behaviour. We are now in a position to carry out an experiment that serves to generate both a new understanding of the experience and a change in our approach or behaviours.

At this stage in the article you may be reflecting that we are proposing the impossible. We believe we are making overt something that we all do at a subconscious level, to some extent, all the time. Through making it overt we strengthen the learning that comes from this critical mindset.

Seeking immediate feedback on our behaviour during the action can give us valuable information to aid our reflection. If we have reached some conclusion from our reflection we can seek opinions from people we are engaged with in the action as to whether our idea may be a better approach. The danger here is that others have their own mental models, beliefs and values, and their responses will reflect these to some extent. There is also the danger of appearing not to know what we are doing, so we have to develop the skills of eliciting information in a safe and productive way.

Let us give you an example. Some years ago during a teamwork learning event a participant said. ‘You think we were wrong to ...’ In fact our view was that what had been done was a sound productive step, if a little unusual. Our reassurances fell on deaf ears. Reflection on our behaviour did not indicate to us what behaviours we had used that would elicit this view. Questioning and further reflection on what had occurred led us to the conclusion that we needed to have given reassurance proactively close to the action. It was our lack of well-timed feedback that resulted in the perspective expressed. So we consciously experimented with positive results. We learned.

The more important question was why were our reassurances not believed? The process and behaviours for handling this took us a little longer to learn, as the opportunity for reality testing is

relatively rare. We suppose that is the point. Reflective practice is more than reviewing what went well and what didn’t go well, and what can be done differently or improved. It is the testing of the findings in a real situation that is necessary for learning. Until tested it is just theory.

JUST THEORY

There are basically two theories in a given situation. They are the ‘theory-in-use’ (that is, the theory that actually guides our actions) and the ‘espoused theory’ (the words we use to convey what we do or think). Argyris makes the case that effectiveness results from developing congruence between theory-in-use and espoused theory. A coach can elicit our espoused theory for a particular situation by asking us what we would do under certain circumstances. This can be compared to what we said we did or help us to identify the theory-in-use by observing our behaviour in the situation. Here we may or may not have congruence.

Research has shown that adult educators have an assumption that teaching adults should differ from teaching children and adolescents. Investigating these differences revealed that although teachers perceive adults as being different, this awareness does not necessarily translate into different approaches in teaching.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN ACTION

Engaging in reflective practice requires us to explore our own perceptions, assume the perspective of the persons with whom we are interacting and those of an external observer. This enables us to identify the assumptions and feelings underlying our actions and then to speculate about how these assumptions and feelings affect our action. This is a special kind of reflection involving a systematic inquiry into the actions themselves. For example, Peters describes a process called DATA that consists of four steps.

Step 1: Describe

First, we describe what it is we want to change. For example, we may wish to become less didactic (pedagogical/instructional) and more facilitative (learner centred) in our training processes. In the DATA model, we would describe a real situation in which training took place, how we felt about our didactic approach and reasons for changing it.

Step 2: Analyse

Second, through analysis, we can identify the circumstances and behaviours that play a part in our current approach. We explore *why* we have adopted this approach. What are our assumptions, beliefs and rules about training and learning? Are these part of a wider value and belief structure that we have? So, we have uncovered the theory behind our didactic approach.

Figure 1: Single-loop learning

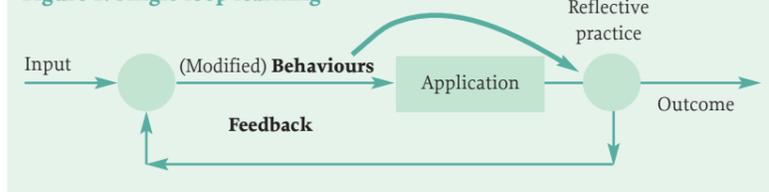


Figure 2: Double-loop learning



Strategies for reflective practice

Reflective practice takes time and effort but the professional development is worth it. The following list summarises some reflective practice processes that may be of help.

- Questioning what, why and how we do things.
- Questioning what, why and how others do things.
- Hypothesising.
- Comparing and contrasting.
- Seeking alternatives to what we do.
- Keeping an open mind.
- Being honest with self, not defending.
- Seeking the framework, theoretical basis, and/or underlying rationale.
- Viewing from own perspective (first position), viewing from the learners perspective (second position) and viewing from an independent perspective (third position).
- Asking ‘What if ...?’
- Asking ‘So what ...?’
- Asking for others’ ideas and viewpoints.
- Considering consequences.
- ‘Chunking up’ to move from specific to general (why?) and chunking down to move to specifics (how?).
- Synthesising and testing.
- Identifying and resolving problems.

Step 3: Theorise

The third step involves considering alternative ways of approaching the training. We know what we do from the analysis. We can challenge it and see what must be different to achieve our goal. We now have a theory about the behaviours for our new facilitative approach.

Step 4: Act

Finally, we will act and try out the behaviours resulting from our new theory. It may be that we have to learn new behaviours and that in itself may require iteratively working through the DATA process. Through this iterative process, we will minimise discrepancies between the espoused theory and the theory in use.

INTO THE NEW SITUATION

There is more to reflective practice than reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. That ‘more’ is to have a clear goal and a process to achieve that goal. This outcome process requires deep reflection and can follow the process that follows. When used by a skilled coach it not only clarifies the goal and processes, but also imparts tremendous motivation.

- A statement of the future goal in positive terms.
- Visualisation of the achievement. What will be seen, heard and felt when the goal has been met.
- Present situation. This establishes the gap between where we are now and where we want to be.
- Skills and processes needed to close the gap.
- How we will acquire the skills and processes required.
- What we may need to give up. This can vary from something as simple as ‘time’ to our beliefs or values about the situation.
- Testing the goal and processes; have we got these right?

CONCLUSION

We have written from the T&D professionals’ perspective as the learner. We learn by reflecting on what we have done well so that we can repeat the process and behaviours and experience again our emotions of success.

We can reflect on what did not go well and decide to do something different. We can reflect on what went well and challenge it in the pursuit of professional excellence. We can, through this process, be

our own coach available to ourselves continuously. We can apply the essence of reflective practice in coaching other T&D professionals to aid them in being excellent practitioners and through this develop ourselves, reflecting on what we have learned from them and their practices in this process. We can aid other professionals in our organisation to be self-developers through reflective practice and be their reflective practice coach extending our value to the organisation and the organisation’s success through having excellent professionals. We believe this is a worthwhile vision.

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Further reading

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- David A Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice-Hall, 1984.
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