Developing the Art of Reflective Practice

By Rod Friesen

"By refusing to learn new things we fall prey to our own ignorance"²

In today's challenging work environment using reflective practice can be an effective tool to encourage new and creative ways to solve reoccurring dilemmas, problems, or conflicts we encounter. Reflective practice allows practitioners, whatever their field or practice, to take a step back and look deeply at situations they are looking for a different outcome in. Reflective practice is essentially about being inquisitive, and curious, asking questions like - what, why, and how.² Asking these questions will deepen understanding by 'unpacking' how 'critical' incidents affect us and encourage the seeking out of new approaches to avoid similar outcomes that we do not want to repeat in the future.

Practitioners often are very skilled in the art of fixing problems with standardized (technical) approaches or theory that we have learned in our field of study.³ The art of reflective practice stretches us to become 'action learners' and unlearn while learning along the way. Whether consciously or unconsciously we often find that challenges with our standard or technical approach can get us 'stuck' because we use much of the same strategies. Professionals can often 'overlearn' to the point where they become resistant to change and less responsive to noticing their bias. Thus when we engage in reflective practice we continue to discover underlying assumptions that may have blinded us in the past from finding new solutions to situations that perplex us. Donald Schon explains the importance of being able to think in action, is particularly important when problems that we encounter are laden with, “complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict.”⁴

What do you think of the following statements?

a) "We are often guided in reflection by internalized social rules, norms, values and beliefs that have been acquired implicitly and explicitly through socialization. These internalized perspectives can distort our interpretation of an experience. To learn deeply from experience, people must critically reflect on assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape their understanding.”⁵


⁴ Ibid., 39.

b) “Prior assumptions and beliefs can lead to partial, limited or incorrect assumptions of a situation.”

**Understanding Reflective Practice**

Developing the art of reflective practice begins with developing a curious level of inquiry, with a view to look deeper at problems by exploring new questions. Reflective practice can be used by individuals alone, or by teams to discuss and learn from each other. Using reflective questions allow the exploration of the five aspects raised by Schon. Reflective practice allows us to interpret dilemmas that are outside the context of standardized approaches that are not working when we know something is wrong. This is where a new approach that opens up our curiosity using questions that encourage exploring what, why and how...

Reflective practice allow us to further explore how context of situations we encounter, and our feelings about how a situation unfolded, or is currently unfolding. As we deepen our reflective questioning about a situation, we are able to get in closer touch with our feelings and how we can potentially change patterns of single-loop learning to engage in double-loop learning described further on in this paper. Reflective practice opens us up to realize that our viewpoint might not always apply to every situation. It encourages healthy exploration of alternative viewpoints. To be open to reflective practice, we need to be “open to contradictory viewpoints,” which is part of the double-loop learning process.

**How We Reflect Critically**

First it is important to have some context in how we think and reflect on a critical level. According to Mezirow, our viewpoint comes from the convergence of the following three psychocultural assumptions working together to create our ‘worldview’. These are the lens in which we interpret our understanding and meaning from events. This is important to understanding how we develop our viewpoint and how reflective practice is important in unpacking our assumptions about our own viewpoint and the context and perspective of situations that we encounter.

**Psychocultural Assumptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociolinguistic</th>
<th>Norms based on social and cultural experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Past history and experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic</td>
<td>How we learn, or style of learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 Ibid., 388.
7 Ibid. 63-64.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid. 385. This chart is based on Mezirow’s theories.
Mezirow asserts that these three psychocultural aspects govern our, "specific set of beliefs, knowledge, judgement, attitude, and feeling which shape a particular interpretation [...] when we express a point of view, an ideal or a way of acting." Therefore, we need to think about how the context of what we have learned is embedded in how we react and respond to daily situations, which is often unconscious.

**Single-loop and Double-loop Learning Processes**

Unconscious learning often occurs in single-loop process, when we ask ourselves common questions that often elicit a similar action. An analogy that may help is that of a sailboat changing course to catch the wind from another direction, but essentially maintains course to the same destination. In sailing terms, when we encounter wind from a different directions we need to take a different ‘tacking’ or otherwise taking a zig-zag course to catch the wind in order to reach the same destination. With single-loop learning, we ask ourselves the same, or very similar questions but continue to use our standardized approach. In contrast, double-loop learning deepens the experience to dilemmas we encounter to ask questions such as, "am I even in the right ocean?" or rather, "should I be in a sailboat at all?"

With single-loop learning, our change in approach is different enough to change course, but not different enough to chart a new course for a new destination. We try and fix the problem with better standardized techniques. With single-loop learning we may repeat the same mistakes over and over again. We do not think about alternative strategies for redesigning our approaches to dilemmas and as Brookfield states that, "adults start to question the assumptions by which they have lived their lives and to scrutinize these assumptions for their accuracy." We start to look for new explanations and begin to reframe our assumptions.

With double-loop learning, we ask ourselves questions that evoke a different kind of personal or team response cycle. As with the question of "am I in the right ocean?", double-loop questions provides an opportunity to discover new lands beyond the direction we thought was our destination. We learn that our assumptions have created the way that we frame problems and that the very way that we have framed the problem, is in fact the 'problem'? We expand on our own theories-in-use propositions, and engage in ‘action learning’, which draws on past knowledge, and incorporates this knowledge into new insights that allow us to adjust and adapt to the new situations, that require different approaches.

This double-loop learning takes us outside of the single loop approach, as we understand our role in reflective practice is to expand our approach to develop greater awareness of

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11 Ibid., 385-386. Quote from Mezirow as cited by Deutsch and Coleman.


contextual differences and similarities. The most important aspect of reflective practice is that we become aware of the contextual differences of situations that may seem similar but require subtle but different approaches. Thus, double-loop learning allows us to draw both from our current knowledge and theories, expanding our views to encompass broader insights into the dilemma. We uncover our underlying assumptions that have been around, and unconsciously affecting the way that we respond to problems. With double-loop learning we learn to dig until we find the root cause.

The difficulty in single-loop learning is that it is most often unconsciously applied and can cause us to adjust ‘tac’ without changing much about our interpretation of the events around us. Engagement with double-loop learning redefines the events through a new lens. This new lens can help us in many ways, such as deepening our relationships with others as we explore meaning together. Reflection also helps us to adapt to new situations, and realize that often situations can have more than one answer and one solution. Reflection slows us down to learn, and recognize that our views may contain bias, and assumptions that are not necessarily true or helpful in framing the problem.

What do you think of the following statement?

In double-loop learning we “identify and address the underlying values and beliefs that influence cultural norms.”

It is important to understand the values base that is developed from single-loop and double loop learning. These can be described as having traits of the following:

### Model 1 and 2 Values (Argyris and Schon)

| Model 1 Values | Specific goals are achieved through controlling the situation  
|                | - need to exert unilateral control over the interaction, a drive to win at all costs, and a tendency to act as if one is rational even when emotions run high |
| Model 2 Values | Different views are encouraged even if they create controversy  
|                | - people value learning about the best solution more than achieving goals that may be incomplete, inaccurate, or inappropriate  
|                | - recognize that problems are complex and co-created |

What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of Model 1 and Model 2 values?

**Reflective Practice as an Individual or Team:**

Practicing reflective practice as a group also provides for the creation of space to understand one another in the context of an environment where people need to work together toward common goals. The design of a reflective practice group can be organic in development. Basic

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16 Ibid., 387.
ground rules can be discussed and developed around how the group members will interact, how often the group will meet, or for how long the meetings will be held.

As a reflective group, questions can be asked that build on incidents or events that are important to the whole group, or can be individual problems that are raised so that other group members can assist in deepening double-loop learning for others through creative inquiry. Reflective practice as a group method of engaging in problem solving can improve communication, and assist to minimize assumptions, and improve meaning, and understanding.

Using the following Ladder of Inference\(^\text{17}\) as a worksheet we can better unpack meaning and understand how our actions are developed from conclusions and assumptions. This further adds meanings that I interpret from the events that occurred and observable data. How we frame the following ladder statements is largely based on our own perceptions of events and our actions that we take are a product of our conclusions, assumptions etc. We develop our inferences both consciously and unconsciously, so looking at our ladder next to someone else's ladder, may assist us in better unpacking values, beliefs and other factors that create misunderstanding and conflict.

The Ladder of Inference\(^\text{18}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps:</th>
<th>My Ladder Statements</th>
<th>Other Person's Ladder Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions that I take</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions that I draw</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions that I make</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanings that I add</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data I select from what I observe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directly observable data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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How Can I Make Time for Reflective Practice?

Developing the art of reflective practice as an individual or a group can take time and some level of discipline. For individuals seeking to become more engaged in reflective practice, keeping a journal of questions, thoughts, interactions, and feelings can be a useful way to look back and reflect on what you as a practitioner in your own field of work are learning. By carrying a small journal or finding a short amount of time each day to journal activities or thoughts, this can free up the mind for other things that may be more pressing at the moment. Then, by coming back to the journal at a later date and re-reading can help stimulate reflective practice.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 392.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 392.
For teams, setting aside 30 - 60 minutes each week, or even bi-monthly, to discuss specific issues can be a good place to begin. Holding time for reflective practice group discussions can save time spent in other meetings, particularly if teams include a reflective portion within a regular meeting time at the beginning or end.

Reflective practice can also be done each day by ensuring reflective questioning becomes a part of everyday language of an organization.

**Posing Reflective Practice Questions:**

Developing reflective questions will take time. Having a few reflective questions to begin is a good idea, as creativity in developing deeper questions will come out of regular discussion. Reflective questions can start out and build in momentum.

a) (Looking back) One thing that happened in this past week at work that I think is really great...why was/is it great?

b) (Looking back) I experienced one dilemma this week...; another way I could have approached this dilemma was...

c) (A dilemma past or present) What else is/was going on here that I/we may not have considered?

d) (A dilemma past or present) In what way is/did my approach affecting my deeper learning about this situation?

e) (A dilemma about the past or present) How am I/did I feeling/feel about the situation? Are there other ways to interpret my feelings in this situation?

**Developing Proverbs as Metaphors to Enhance Reflective Practice**

In reflective practice, creating proverbs can also provide powerful metaphors that can be helpful in giving us future basis for understanding, and framing dilemmas. Proverbs are helpful and create way of understanding a dilemma and name and frame a problem. Particularly as Schon's description earlier that these problems become larger dilemmas of our practice, particularly when they are out of the ordinary, having, “complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict.”

On the next page there are eight reflective proverbs that demonstrate the type of learning that a reflective practitioner can engage in on a personal level and come as a result of insights into double-loop learning. Developing proverbs can assist in reflective practice, and become gentle reminders and encouragement to maintain double-loop learning and reflective practice.

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19 The first four reflective questions were provided by Professor Reina Neufeldt, PhD., Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON (2013).

Eight Dimensions of an Effective Reflective Practitioner

by Rod Friesen

A reflection is only present when the water is calm. Time taken to ask questions develops the art of reflection.

When we stop asking questions, we can become unaware of our blind spots.

You can’t always use the same tool twice. A reflective practitioner is able to respond to varied situations and circumstances.

Misunderstandings can occur because meaning is not explored fully. A reflective practitioner’s job is to uncover what is occurring but not visible.

It is better to have a small mouth with two big ears, than a big mouth and two small ears.

We must challenge what we think, through observation and learning. Or else, what we know may cause our own blindness.

Involve others in the solution, and they will appreciate the problem more.

Knowing yourself is the first step to changing your patterns of behaviour. A reflective practitioner must be open to exploring their assumptions.

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21 Written in a personal journal by Rod Friesen, “What Reflective Practice Can Teach Us: Eight Dimensions of an Effective Reflective Practitioner,” (April 2, 2013) for PACS 602 The Practice of Peace, Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, ON.
Teaching Plan for Developing the Art of Reflective Practice

Discuss the first two questions:

• What do you use that guides you when approaching situations involving dilemmas? (complex, uncertain, instable, unique, and value's based)

• Most people look at cause and effect - if I do A then B will occur\textsuperscript{22}; dig deeper - explore context, systems, sub-systems, relationships, issues.\textsuperscript{23}

• What feelings do you encounter when you hear contradictory points of view?

Discuss Psychocultural assumptions and where they develop from:

• social/cultural experiences

• past history and experiences

• our learning styles

Discuss framing the problem and single/double-loop learning:

• Schon describes how technical or standard approaches do not typically work for dilemmas (need thinking, feeling, intuition)

• Have you ever thought about how a problem framed is the ‘problem’?

• Name a problem: what assumptions do we have when we frame a problem from our point of view?

• Discuss double-loop learning to get out of a ‘rut’ and re-frame the problem. How much is a problem a problem?

Discuss Model 1 Values (Single-loop) and Model 2 Values (Double-loop) Learning:

• Model 1 - specific goals are achieved through controlling the situation

• Model 2 - different views are encouraged even if they create controversy

Discuss the Ladder of Inference: (What and why are you thinking)

• Actions that I take

• Conclusions that I draw

• Assumptions that I make

\textsuperscript{22} From a quote “if you do A-B must happen” discussed by guest speaker Professor Daniel Lai speaking about reflective practice from Wilfrid Laurier University in PACS 602, The Practice of Peace, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo ON, January 22, 2013.

• **Meanings** that I add
• **Data I select** from what I observe
• **Directly observable data**

(Data that we directly observe, may be misinterpreted through data we select, meanings that we add lead to assumptions, conclusions and actions. Test assumptions by asking open ended questions to clear up misconceptions so we do not climb up the ladder of inference)

**Participant Handout**

What do you think of the following statements?

a) "We are often guided in reflection by internalized social rules, norms, values and beliefs that have been acquired implicitly and explicitly through socialization. These internalized perspectives can distort our interpretation of an experience. To learn deeply from experience, people must critically reflect on assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape their understanding."[24]

b) "Prior assumptions and beliefs can lead to partial, limited or incorrect assumptions of a situation."[25]

c) In double-loop learning we "identify and address the underlying values and beliefs that influence cultural norms."[26]

**Try out a dilemma - Posing Reflective Questions:**[27]

a) (Looking back) One thing that happened in this past week at work that I think is really great...why was/is it great?

b) (Looking back) I experienced one dilemma this week...; another way I could have approached this dilemma was...

c) (A dilemma past or present) What else is/was going on here that I/we may not have considered?

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[25] Ibid., 388.


[27] The first four reflective questions were provided by Professor Reina Neufeldt, PhD., Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON (2013).