

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

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Professional Skills and Employability

10 Understanding the value of reflection

When we are asked to reflect on our developing skills, an event or a particular theory, we know it is difficult and generally feel ‘what’s the point?’, even though we may know deep down that it is an essential skill. The pressure on managers to keep moving, to drive their plan forward and come up with new ideas is what we generally consider a manager should be doing. However, if we just *do* things without reflecting on the consequences then we are essentially a non-thinking and non-strategic learner and in later life a similar kind of manager.

By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius – Chinese philosopher 551–479BC

In this chapter you will:

1. understand the value of reflection as a strategic tool;
2. know how to use several frameworks for reflection;
3. work through some of the models of reflection.

USING THIS CHAPTER

If you want to dip into the sections	Page	If you want to try the activities	Page
1 Introduction	292	1 Why don't you like reflecting?	294
2 What is reflection?	292	2 Reflecting on your key skills	299
3 Why should we reflect?	293	3 Reflecting on your group working skills	300
4 What skills do we need to reflect effectively?	294	4 Update your personal development planner	302
5 Are there frameworks to help me reflect?	296		
6 When will I need to use reflection on my course?	298		
7 On reflection	302		

Estimate your current levels of confidence. Mark 1 (poor) and 5 (good) for the following.

I know why reflection is a strategic tool.	I know some of the frameworks for reflecting.	I can work through a structured framework of reflection.

Date: _____

1 Introduction

There is usually a big sigh when we are asked to reflect on something. Reflecting is not easy and it is more than just being in a reflective mood or daydreaming. In order to reflect on an event, you have to be able to describe the event as it occurred and state how things could have been done differently to create a better outcome. If the outcome is perfect, knowing why is equally important so that you are able to repeat the success. If you are reflecting on your skills, you need to describe how well you can do something now and what you need to do to improve. Reflection therefore enables you to verbalise (externalise) what has happened/how things are so you are able to capture the event or activity. It is an essential strategic tool.

Consider the following questions:

- What is it that turns experience into learning?
- What specifically enables you to gain the maximum benefit from the situations you find yourself in?
- How can you apply your experience in new contexts?

(Boud *et al.* 1985)

Boud *et al.* (1985) suggest that structured reflection is the key to learning from experience, and because reflection is difficult, we could do with some support.

2 What is reflection?

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Informal Education (InfED)*, the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey (1859–1952) is considered to be a significant figure in progressive education. How we think and reflect in the process of learning was key to his ideas. For Dewey, reflection was both active at the time an event is occurring, referred to as ‘incidental reflection’,

and then later through making sense of that experience through ‘systematic reflection’, as without systematic reflection the learning can be lost. The poet T.S. Eliot wrote in *The Dry Salvages* (1944) and the third poem of the Four Quartets, ‘We had the experience but missed the meaning’, and this should be a pertinent reminder of the value of reflection.

The work of Dewey also influenced Donald Schön (1930–1997), another American philosopher. He is known for his work on the value of reflective practice in organisations and the term ‘reflective practitioner’. Schön’s position on reflection is not dissimilar to that of Dewey and Schön refers to *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. *Reflection-in-action* refers to thinking and adjusting what we do ‘on the hoof’. Being able to do this enables us to respond flexibly to a given situation and prevents us from sticking to rigid plans. *Reflection-on-action* refers to thinking about an event: what happened, how other people reacted, what the outcome was and the interrelationship between certain actions that affected the outcome. This is what we commonly think reflection is when we are asked to do it. For both Dewey and Schön, making sense of or making explicit what we have learned is the key value of reflection. Much of Schön’s work concerned how society, organisations and individuals learn and develop.

How organisations learn became the research area of Peter Senge (1947–) and from him we have the concept of the ‘learning organisation’. Learning organisations reflect the ability of individuals within that organisation to openly reflect on what has been learned and take that forward collectively to resolve issues and achieve common goals. Reflections from all individuals within the organisation are considered valuable. Senge refers to this work as the Fifth Discipline, and you may be asked to look at his work in your studies.

3 Why should we reflect?

Most of the time, we are thinking about things without being aware of it, or regarding it as ‘reflection’ at all. Your reflection at this point is IMPLICIT, it has value, but it is not captured or made explicit. Once you are asked to reflect or critically reflect on something, you start to make it EXPLICIT (i.e. you become conscious about what happened/is happening) and use it strategically. Take a look at Activity 1.

Hot Tip



Search on the internet using the search term ‘conscious competence’ and it will provide you with a series of informative sites that can help you realise why reflection is an essential strategic tool for a learner, whether as a student or an employee learner.

ACTIVITY 1 Why don't you like reflecting?

If you have already been asked to do some reflection or reflective writing, do you want to scream *WHY*? If you do, you are like many other people (not just students) who feel the same way. So, why are we generally so resistant to reflecting on our learning? One reason is because we have to confront something we may feel uncomfortable about and going back to look at it is not always pleasant. Also, we are not sure how to analyse what happened or what to do with the information we uncover. Look at the table below and tick the views that you have regarding reflection.

What I feel	Usually me	Why do you feel like this?
I find reflection difficult because I don't know what I am supposed to write.		
I find it a waste of time and it just takes too long.		
I can't see where I'm developing skills in my courses so how can I reflect on it?		
I don't know what to do with my PDP when I complete it		

Check the feedback section at the end of the chapter for more information.

This exercise is itself an example of reflection. You possibly had some difficulty getting started, but once you relaxed into it, I am sure you were able to tap into how you felt.

4 What skills do we need to reflect effectively?

Reflection is about you:

- understanding what happened or where you are now with an issue;
- being perceptive enough to 'see' what happened;
- recognising how you felt.

Being perceptive enough to 'read' what has happened and be in touch with your feelings about it will depend a lot on your emotional and social intelligence (see below).

Emotional intelligence

Daniel Goleman, author of the popular book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), claims that intellectual IQ alone does not give us all the skills needed to be successful in everyday life. We need to develop self-awareness and recognise what others are feeling (empathy), know how to handle our emotions and to have self-discipline. This, Goleman claims, is emotional intelligence (EI). Group work projects, for example, if taken seriously, develop our interpersonal skills (emotional literacy). Similarly, the personal development planner is a tool that enables us to reflect on our progress and personal development. These aspects of your curriculum therefore have good reasons for being there.

According to the Emotional Intelligence network (www.6seconds.org), EI comprises, in essence, three areas: *know yourself*, *choose yourself*, *give yourself*.

Emotional intelligence categories	Questions	Application to your studies
Know yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What makes you think and feel the way you do? ■ What parts of your reactions are habitual or consciously thought through? ■ What are you afraid of/anxious about? 	Being honest with yourself enables you to reflect on your qualities and faults. You learn from your experiences. Reflect on this through your studies. This reflection should alert you to habitual actions such as how you behave in groups or how you are at public speaking. When you become aware of this you can then try to prevent yourself being a hostage to previously learned negative reactions.
Choose yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do you know what's right for you? ■ If you were not afraid or anxious, what would you do? ■ Can you increase your awareness of your actions? 	Manage your feelings. If something starts to stress you, identify exactly what it is and objectively assess why this is a stressor for you. Can you manage it yourself or do you need help?
Give yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Am I helping or hurting people? ■ Am I working interdependently with others? ■ Have I developed empathy? ■ Do I work by a set of personal standards? 	Be aware of your fellow students. When working together be alert to their needs as well as yours (be empathic).

Source: Adapted from the Emotional Intelligence Network (<http://6seconds.org/index.php>)

By developing your emotional intelligence, you have the grounding to develop your self-belief and self-confidence, which gives you the insight to see the value of reflection. You also become aware of your own behaviour and you may start to reflect how this impacts on the outcome of an event.

Social intelligence

In 2006 Daniel Goleman wrote another book, about social intelligence. For Goleman, emotional intelligence is concerned with how we handle ourselves and manage our emotions, while social intelligence is about having empathic skills, motivating and inspiring others and generally knowing how to work most effectively with others. We are all aware of people who give us a 'buzz' and make us feel good and those who just seem to drain us.

Social intelligence is about your:

- feelings of self-respect, self-worth;
- ability to use language effectively;
- understanding of social and organisational contexts;
- confidence in being honest (but not impolite!) which others will appreciate;
- empathic qualities, i.e. your ability to 'connect' with people.

In companies, staff appraisal can be carried out using the 360 procedure where everyone you deal with, above and below you, appraise you. As a student this doesn't happen, but your friends may give you feedback (and you them) as well as your tutors. Feedback is a good source for your reflection and you should use it positively.

NOTE If you search 'Daniel Goleman' on the Internet you will find many references to him as well as small videos of him talking about his ideas.

5 Are there frameworks to help me reflect?

There is no one technique for reflection, but very often if you have been asked to reflect you will be given a series of questions to answer. It is important to know the purpose of your reflection and have a structure on which you can focus. Is your reflection concerned with personal development or is it concerned with a particular learning event? Take a look at the lifecycle of the reflection process in Figure 10.1.

Your tutor will probably give you a structure to work from, but if you are left to devise your own then you will need to develop a framework that follows the reflection lifecycle in Figure 10.1. Below are some other frameworks that you could use to help you develop your own reflective cycle.