



Module 4

Topic 4.4: Reflective Practice as Learning

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Introduction: What is REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?

"We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience." John Dewey

Reflection is something that we all do in the course of our everyday lives. In the simplest sense, reflection is a process of *making sense of an experience*, or *making meaning* from an experience. For example, we often reflect when we have met a new person: we ask ourselves questions in our minds like: *Do I like this person? How does this person make me feel? Do I want to keep on interacting with this person?* Or, we reflect on an unexpected event, like the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in our lives, asking ourselves: *How am I going to cope with this new situation? Why is this situation making me feel so unsettled? How can I draw on my previous experiences of crises or difficulties to help me through this?*

Reflecting on and making sense of our experiences is an important step in us **LEARNING** from and through these experiences. Reflection is also important to enable **ADAPTATION**: if we can step back and look at how things happened, think about why they happened the way they did, we can then think about how we might do things differently next time around. Reflection therefore also plays a central role in **EVALUATION**, as discussed in Topic 4.3 (see Figure 1 below as a reminder of how reflection was introduced in Topic 1.6 as a key learning process).

According to Donald Schön, a philosopher and urban planner from Boston in the USA, reflective practice is *the practice by which professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience*. He identified two aspects to this: **1) reflection-in-action**: to reflect on behaviour as it happens, and **2) reflection-on-action**: to reflect after the event, to review, analyse, and evaluate the situation (Schön, 1983) (Figure 1).

"Reflection is a state of mind, an ongoing constituent of practice, not a technique, or curriculum element. Reflective Practice can enable practitioners to learn from experience about themselves, their work, and the way they relate to home and work, significant others and wider society and culture. It gives strategies to bring things out into the open, and frame appropriate and searching questions never asked before. It can provide relatively safe and confidential ways to explore and express experiences otherwise difficult to communicate" (Bolton, 2010)



Figure 1: Reminder from Topic 1.6: Introduction to reflection as a learning practice.

The principle of REFLEXIVITY which we introduced in Topic 2.3 (as a principle to guide stakeholder engagement processes), is what underpins the development of our personal and collective reflective practice (Figure 2). A commitment to reflexivity means being able to step outside of our experience, take a bird's eye view, and reflect carefully and critically what is going on. Through this we can consider adapting our practice and be responsive to the ever-changing context. Reflective practice is the way in which we actually bring this commitment to life and put it into practice.

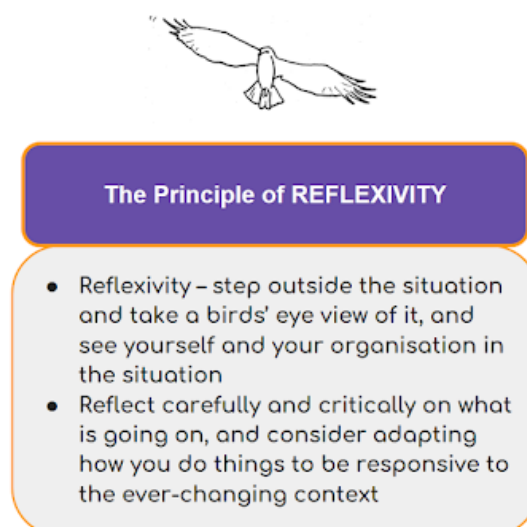


Figure 2: Reminder from Topic 2.3: The principle of reflexivity is about taking a bird's eye view of our practice, reflecting on it, and adapting it to the ever-changing context.

In our work as facilitators of stakeholder engagement and social learning processes, reflection is therefore an important way of us learning about our own work or practice, and being able to adapt our practice and ways of doing things based on changing contexts. To develop a REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, and thereby embed ongoing-learning into our everyday work, we can ask ourselves and/or the participants, these kinds of **REFLECTION QUESTIONS** (e.g. during and after an experience, interaction, or learning process):

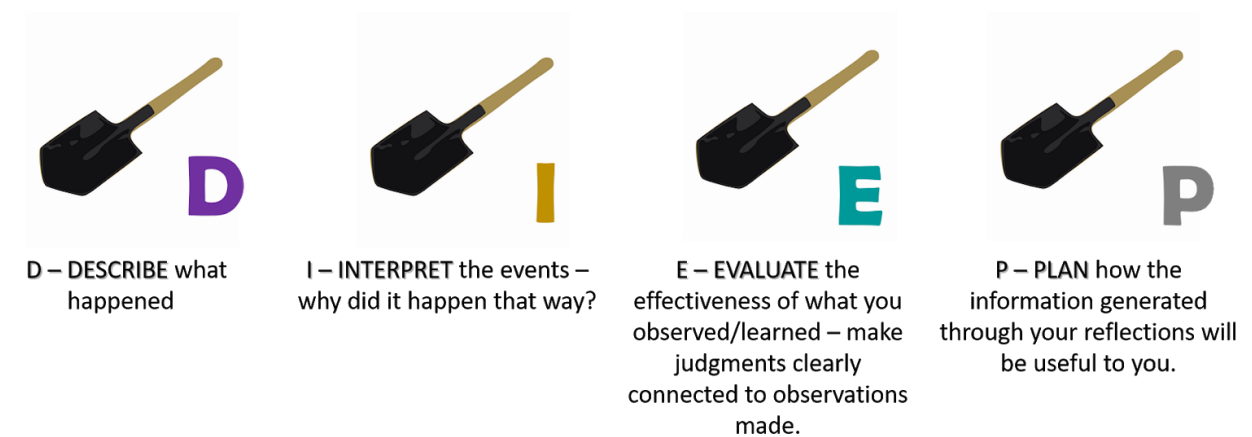
- **What?** (what happened?) **So, what?** (what does it mean?) **Now what?** (what are we going to do about this?)
- **What went well, and what didn't go well? Why, or why not?**
- **Did I/we achieve what we set out to do? If not, why not?**
- **How could I/we adapt our intervention or learning process in the future?**

Tools to support reflective practice

We now present you with a range of frameworks, templates and guiding questions to facilitate reflection. You can use these tools to *reflect on your own, or together with others*, i.e. they can be used individually, collectively or organisationally. Also remember that the **guiding REFLECTION QUESTIONS** (above) are a useful tool to guide reflective practice in a variety of contexts.

REFLECTION TOOL 1: THE “DIG DIEP” FRAMEWORK:

You can use the D-I-E-P (Describe-Interpret-Evaluate-Plan) framework to guide your reflections i.e. to ‘DIP DEEPER’ into your experiences and catalyse learning (RMIT University, 2015; Boud et al. 1985). Below we describe the framework, and provide guiding questions under each heading.



D - DESCRIBE what happened: Describe the experience e.g. of a specific event, interaction or learning process which you facilitated. Explain how things happened or unfolded and identify key elements of the experience or process. Use your power of observation to carefully describe things.

I - INTERPRET the events - why did it happen that way?/ why is it happening this way? Interpret your experience in relation to the event or process, explain the role of the elements that you identified in your description. What worked well, and what did not? Why, or why not? Now go deeper and analyse your interpretation by exploring the consequences of the experience or insight: Does this change things? Does it cause any feelings or change your understanding of a previous experience/insight? Is your experience/insight transferable or relevant in other situations?

E - EVALUATE the effectiveness of what you observed/learned - i.e. make judgments clearly connected to observations made. Unpack and explain your opinions, experiences and feelings about your experience in order to make sense of your progress. Evaluate the situation yourself: What is your opinion about how you experienced this event or process? What do you think is/was really going on? What sense can you make of the situation?

P - PLAN how the information generated through your reflections will be useful to you. What are your recommendations? So what? Make a plan of how you will act differently from now on: how will you incorporate what you learned? What could you do differently going forward? Is there someone you could reach out to help you with this?

REFLECTION TOOL 2: BACK-TO-OFFICE REPORT

The back-to-office (BTO) report is a tool which supports reflective writing. This tool has been refined for use in the context of natural resource management by Karen Kotschy and others implementing Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approaches at the [Association for Water and Rural Development \(AWARD\)](#) and in the [Tsitsa Project](#).

The BTO is a document template that helps NRM practitioners and facilitators to reflect on various activities such as field work, meetings, workshops and other experiences in a structured way. It's a useful way for people managing MEL processes to gather reflection data from teams. The BTO can be customized according to the aims of your social learning or stakeholder engagement process, and it can be used both as an individual or collective reflection tool.

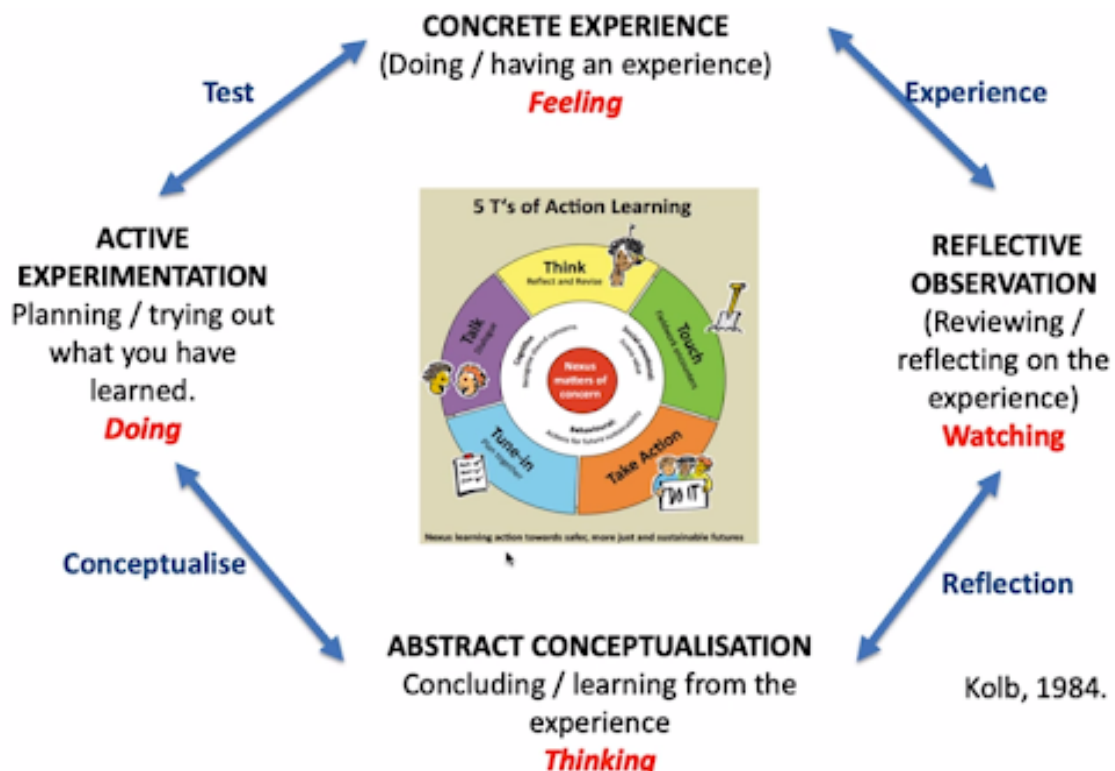
Back to office report template

Activity:	
Date of activity:	
Purpose of activity:	
Reported by:	
Who hosted/facilitated the activity?	
Who was the activity aimed at?	
Who attended the activity?	
Summary of the activity:	

Observations:	
Relevant information:	
Next steps/follow-up actions:	
Parties with whom this information should be shared:	
Appendices (e.g. register, agenda, minutes, presentations, handouts, photos).	

REFLECTION TOOL 3: THE '5 TS' OF ACTION LEARNING AND KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE

This framework has been designed for use in a variety of 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD) contexts, and brings together a classic action learning framework - the '5 Ts of Action Learning' with Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984; O'Donoghue, 2020). The framework places reflection within an on-going cycle of PLAN-DO-REFLECT-LEARN.



For more information on this approach, visit the Environmental learning Research Centre's Knowledges Commons Website: <https://www.ru.ac.za/elrc/projects/knownledgescommons/>

On this website, Prof. Rob O'Donoghue has prepared two short videos on ***Learning and Education for Sustainable Development***. The first videos reflect 'Changing Learning and Training Environments,' a chapter in the recent UNESCO book on 'Issues and Trends in ESD.' The video is in 2 parts: 1. ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) learning theory with case study examples, 2. An overview of common theory and some recent process perspectives. The second series is a 5-part set of Hand-Print CARE videos on learning theory for classroom contexts of teaching and learning.

REFLECTION TOOL 4: OPEN, INTUITIVE, OPPORTUNISTIC, OR ARTS-BASED REFLECTION

While it is useful to have *frameworks, templates, or guiding questions* to structure and guide reflections, sometimes it is best just to create space in our lives for open, intuitive, opportunistic or arts-based reflections.



For example, you could take a quiet moment for yourself and reflect in a more open, emergent way on what you have experienced and what it means. This might mean **sitting somewhere quietly with a cup of tea or coffee and thinking** about your experiences; or maybe it means doing some **free writing or drawing**, i.e. just writing or drawing your thoughts and reflections in an open-ended way, as if you were having a conversation with yourself; or **going for a walk or run** to process your experiences. Some people also find that engaging in some kind of **artistic process can enable them to reflect**, e.g. drawing, singing, dancing, photography, or reading or writing poetry.



This kind of open, intuitive reflection can also happen together with others, often quite unexpectedly or opportunistically. For example, some of the most useful reflective conversations between colleagues happen **in the car, while driving back home** from an event or experience. The **'spaces in-between' formal planned activities, sessions and events** are often where the richest reflection happens (e.g. tea and coffee breaks in meetings, drinks after a workshop, taking selfies on a field trip, walking back to the hotel room after a day of meetings, or even in the chat box during a Zoom meeting!).



Keep an eye out for opportunities for this kind of open and intuitive reflection, and allow yourself to tap into your own inner reflective capacities, or those of your colleagues and friends.



REFLECTION TOOL 5: T-PAGE TO PROMOTE ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION

The “T-page” template is a tool to help you to engage with and reflect on course content - *or any other novel concepts or knowledge you may come across* - in relation to your own work (i.e. to help you to SITUATE the work and MAKE SENSE OF IT in relation to their own work and context).

Reflection and Active learning: T-page Example

Here write the title of the presentation you watch or the hand-out you are reading, and the date

- Here jot down things that stand out for you – what seems very important? Interesting? Useful? Difficult?
- This is not a summary of the presentation or reading.
- Use bullets or numbers for each short point

- Here make notes about how each point is relevant.
- Can you use it in your work? In your assignment?
- Should you discuss this with your tutor or peers?

What is significant about this, for YOU?

Design Feature: T-page is a tool to help learners engage with and reflect on course content in relation to their own work (situating it). They use the T-page while working on their own and bring their notes to 'class' so as to connect their reflections into the discussion, through reflection more deeply connecting the work of the course and their own situations

You can use the T-page while working on your own, and then use it in conversation with others (e.g. in your tutor groups, or in your organisation) to connect your own reflections into discussion with others. This kind of reflection can enable you to more deeply connect the work of the course - or other new knowledge and ideas - into your situation.

Concluding thoughts on working with reflection in learning processes

Always remember that reflection is an ongoing process that is applied throughout your learning journey (i.e. social learning or stakeholder engagement). Therefore, reflection should not be seen as a step that one must do at the end of a learning process or engagements. It is also important to think of a reflection tool or process that works best for your context in order to maximise the learning insights. e.g. if as a facilitator you would like to reflect on the workshop you conducted with participants, and you want to know “what went wrong / could be improved”, it might be best to ask such question through an individual reflection tool rather than asking it on open discussions, but this depends entirely on the context and participants involved in the process. Another example could be when you are working with stakeholders in different power hierarchies or areas of influence (i.e. having traditional leaders within your participants or having a high-level manager in the midst of low-level employees of the same organization). In these cases, a facilitator must employ a reflection tool that takes into account the power dynamics, as these might affect your process.

Activity:

Try out one of the **REFLECTION TOOLS** as a way of starting to *work towards your assignment: you could do this individually, and/or select one to work on together with your tutor group.*

Audio snippets from the field: Insights from learning practitioners



On the course website under the materials tab for Topic 4.4, we have shared some audio clips from practitioners in our field. We asked colleagues and course participants the following guiding question to learn from them how they reflect in their practice:

What does reflection mean in your practice as a learning facilitator, and what practical suggestions do you have for beginners?

References:

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