Thinking Reflectively

Reflective thinking is the capacity to review experience and learn from it. By using reflective thinking, you will come to understand how your thoughts and actions in a particular set of circumstances may have led to particular outcomes. This is very helpful, especially where you are learning to apply theory in practice (such as using classroom management techniques in teaching, conflict resolution strategies in counselling, or clinical practice in nursing).

Reflecting on secondary experience (learning from the experience of others)
In contributing to the common good, there will be situations where you will need to make decisions that impact on others at local, national and even international levels. Often the decision-making will relate to situations of which you might not have had direct experience—for example, what to do about homelessness or domestic violence.

In the Core Curriculum you will be asked to reflect on a range of situations that you did not directly experience, and where you were not an actor in the situation, in order to learn from others’ experiences and decision-making (“secondary” experience). It might be that you read about these situations, listen to them, or view them on video. There are two types of analysis going on in this type of reflection:

1. an analysis of the experiences, perspectives and decisions of others, and
2. an analysis of your own perspectives on viewing their experience second-hand (how would you act in a similar context?)

Below you can see the process you would follow:

Observe Experience
• What is going on?

The Learning /Action Plan
• If you were in a similar situation in the future, what would you do?
• Possibly propose theory as to why the situation played out as it did.

Evaluate
• Positive and negative outcomes
• Could it have happened differently? How?
• Were there gaps in knowledge? If so, what was the impact?

Analyze
• What happened, and why, according to those in the situation?
• What happened, and why, according to your own perspective?

Reflecting on your own experience

There are many situations in which it is helpful to learn the skills of reflective thinking in order to learn from your own ("direct") experience. One of these situations is at University, where you learn a new skill or theory and have to apply it in a real-life context. Reflective thinking will, in this instance, enable you to evaluate not only how well you have developed or understood the skill or theory, but also its value or overall effectiveness in that setting.

The need to be able to learn from experience by reflective thinking is very likely to occur in your future professional life. For example, you might initiate or be asked to act to achieve some outcome for your employer’s business or organisational priorities. This may be as:

- part of a team
- the leader of a team
- an individual.

Professionalism includes reflecting on work activities so that all players analyse the process and evaluate the outcomes. Whether the outcomes are judged to be successful or not so successful, it is important to know what worked, and why—or why not.

Below is an example of a reflective practice process:


The key components of effective reflective practice include:

- Honesty—be authentic
- Keep a journal/notes for a project or planned experience
- Observe external actions and internal thoughts/feelings both pre and post actions
- Analyse why you or others made certain choices and consider what the outcomes might have been if other choices had been made
• Identify and evaluate any gaps in knowledge or in skills (both technical and interpersonal) that impacted on the outcomes
• Note how you will try to address these identified gaps
• Note your general learning, for future strategies.

When you are in a new situation:
• Plan how you will transfer the previous learning to this new situation.

Whatever undergraduate or postgraduate study you do, one of your tasks will be to discover the reflective models that your profession uses. Below is a reflective model developed for nursing by Atkins and Murphy:


RESOURCES

**Law**
Education
Academic Skills Unit, University of Melbourne. “Reflective Practice for Education Students.”


Social Work
Cooper, J. “Reflective Practice: Luxury or Necessity for Social Workers?” Community Care. 2010.

Health Sciences
McClure, Patricia. “Reflection on Practice, Making Practice-Based Learning Work.” School of Health Sciences, University of Ulster.

Working in Partnership Program. “Example of a Reflective Practice Tool.”