WHAT IS REFLECTIVE THINKING?

How is reflective thinking different to critical thinking?

Critical thinking engages a range of thinking skills to address a question or a problem so we have a clear analysis or exposition.

Reflective thinking steps back and starts a process of reviewing experience; making judgements about it, and possibly setting up actions or strategies for implementation when you are next in such a situation - with a view to improvement!

It is not easy to be aware of all factors affecting an outcome, especially in our own experience as a learner, a member of a community or a profession. It is reflective thinking that gives you a tool to ‘dig out’ these factors and start controlling how well you learn, and how well you manage professional practices/jobs.

In reflective thinking, we look at the whole picture with its network of relationships (informational, the natural world and human):

- You and your biases/perspectives
- The content, the skills
- Other colleagues, and their biases and assumptions
- Your context, the specific job, and client/customer/patient/student
- What actually happened in this mix?
- Are/were you satisfied with the outcome of an event/situation?

We suggest you make some brief notes on how well you manage reflective thinking in each of the contexts addressed here.

Then come to some decisions about how you will implement this thinking tool to manage how you learn and perform in your intended profession.
REFLECTIVE THINKING CONTEXTS

There are three main contexts for reflective thinking:

1. Reflecting on how you learn, your metacognition;
2. Reflecting on secondary experience, as in UNCC300 Module 3;
3. Reflecting on your professional experience either alone or in a team effort.

Apply theory to practice ..... what have you actually done with your content?

How will you know you learn effectively, and in turn, produce quality outcomes as a life-long learner, as a professional, and within the many other multi-faceted roles of your life?

Reflective questions should identify the gap between what you know and can do and what you need to know and do.

This is part of the synthesis process of Graduate Attribute 8 as you need to relate new knowledge to your prior understanding and modify your final understanding. See the first two pages of GA8 and consider the levels of thinking outlined here as you proceed through reflective thinking.

How much you need to rework and modify depends on size of the gap, how out of kilter your prior understanding was with the new input.

IDENTIFYING THE GAP IS A REFLECTIVE PROCESS: ADDRESSING THE GAP IS GA8
REFLECTING TO TAKE CONTROL OF HOW YOU LEARN

The actual areas that each individual will need to address will vary tremendously, depending on the weaknesses you identify. These may be referencing style or limitations in critical thinking and application of theory to new contexts, inability to step back from content to evaluate how you are planning and reviewing your own arguments - or even poor coherence of ideas.

It is very helpful to keep a record sheet of every part of a task or an assignment that you find difficult. This 'difficult' and 'uncomfortable' feeling is an indicator of a skill or knowledge gap. Within this gap may be a number of skills.

- The task is to identify what actually lies behind your difficulties with tasks as you progress through a particular assignment, and start developing the skills to progressively diminish these difficulties.
- Reflect on your progress and your ability to identify and address your skill and knowledge weaknesses when you receive your assessment on an assignment. It is a cyclic process with the stages outlined below.

**Identification is just the first step**

Once you have identified a number of skill sets or knowledge gaps, you are in a position to address them. There are many resources in the community and at ACU, depending on your need. Some are relatively quick and easy to solve, such as referencing style, while others will entail repeated practice (monitoring and evaluation of your progress, in particular how you are analysing the content within the context of the specific task, and whether you are writing coherently).

Between identification and the next assignment is a process of developing your skills and deepening your knowledge.

Fannon, K. (2013) Reflective learning cycle
Consciously applying improved thinking and writing skills

The next assignment is not just about covering new content. The following steps enable the learner to actively control how they learn and the quality of the finished work:

Planning

- Analyse the task/question and map what you need to do to address the question.
- Decide which areas require research and where you will start.
- Reflect at every stage on whether you are addressing the performance criteria and are rigorously answering the question.
- Self-evaluate your skill and knowledge gaps and plan how you will address these.

Analysing and writing

- Draft and redraft and in the process, continue to actively focus on your identified skill improvement areas, that is, how you are performing while you are answering the question.

Reflection on assessed work

- Consider the assessment, what went well or has improved since the last assignment.
- Identify the successful strategies behind these improvements and take note.
- Evaluate the areas for improvement and plan again what needs to be developed and how. Make notes, or you will forget. Fail to reflect effectively, and you will keep performing at the same level.

SOME FURTHER REFERENCES


Reflecting on secondary experience (learning from the experience of others)

In UNCC300 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:

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

The model below sets out the areas for reflection at the primary and secondary levels:


In considering human dignity, there will be situations which will not always be clear-cut as human life is complex and situations are ‘messy’.

Your reflections and decisions will relate to situations of which you might not have had direct experience—especially, for example, how humans lose dignity through violence and imprisonment; or conversely, how some humans may acquire dignity through their handling of imprisonment (Nelson Mandela).

However, through our common humanity we can place ourselves in others’ shoes and comprehend to some extent the emotional and mental components. In some situations, we can find similar experiences in our own lives and use them to examine our responses. Module 3 in UNCC300 will ask you to do just that (3.1.4 To be human is to hold a number of tensions together).
REFLECTING ON YOUR PROFESSIONAL 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 a 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.

Think about how you experienced an event: an interchange with a business client, a problematic stage within or the final outcomes of any of the following:

- project;
- clinical practice;
- curriculum implementation;
- business deal;
- new therapy; or
- legal case.

Whether the outcomes are judged to be successful or not so successful, it is important to know what worked, and why—or why not.

The Gibbs model of the reflective practice process is generic and so useful in most contexts:

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.
- This may involve proposing to work management solutions for future projects or procedures.

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.

![Reflective Model Diagram]

The short paper below includes a sample reflection by a nursing student in a surgical ward and uses the 5Rs reflective model [Reporting, Responding, Reasoning, Relating, Reconstructing].

Facilitating Reflection on Practice, Leading clinical learning, Leadership and Clinical Education (LaCE), Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology.


NURSING ARTICLE