Reflective practice is a technique that is growing in popularity. It serves as a useful method to identify learning and development needs. In the last of this series on Learning Needs Analysis, Sarah Cook discusses:

- What is reflective practice?
- What are its origins?
- How and when can reflective practice be used?
- What are the skills needed?
- What is the link to learning practice and Learning Needs Analysis?

**What is reflective practice?**

Reflective practice is the process of reflecting on action that has been taken, either during an activity or after an activity itself. If the reflection is undertaken during the activity, for example mid-way during a project, the reflection can be undertaken by either interrupting and stopping the activity or without interrupting it. The two types of reflective practice are therefore on action and in action.

The purpose of reflective practice is to allow an individual or team to step back and reflect on behaviours and actions taken, thus allowing them to learn, build on successes and make improvements going forward.

**What are the origins of reflective practice?**

Reflective practice is not a technique that is new to the training profession. Indeed the Kolb / Lewin learning cycle shows Reflective Observation as the second stage of how we learn. The Kolb / Lewin learning cycle proposes that there are four stages of learning. These can happen as the learning takes place or over days or weeks. People can go round the cycle several times before as they learn.

The first step is Concrete Experience - this is the 'being there and doing' phase. It is followed by Reflective Observation. Reflecting on the experience and what that means on a personal basis. This is then followed by Abstract Conceptualisation - putting the experience into a conceptual framework or terms of reference, if these are already known. Alternatively, if a conceptual framework does not exist, it is about making connections with past concepts or developing new ones of your own. The final phase is active experimentation - taking what you have learned and
trying new ways of doing things.

Donald Shön first coined the phrase ‘Reflective Practice’ in 1983. He argued that the ability to reflect on action was part of the process of continuous learning. Reflective practice has grown in popularity as a technique over the past twenty years. Today reflective practice is used in both the private and public sectors for a range of activities. For example, in the health service it is a method used to help clinicians reflect on the way they are dealing with specific cases or diseases.

Donald Shön argued that the method of 'battery' learning or 'learning by rote' does not allow for reflection on our experiences or feelings. The act of reflecting on what we have done or are doing allows us to explore why we act like we do and what was/is happening in the context in which we work. It allows individuals to build new understandings to inform future actions and behaviours.

Shön's approach is closely linked to the theories on how people learn. It takes into account that a learning curve is in practice, far from 'steep'. People learn through peaks and troughs, rather than a smooth curve. Shön felt that reflecting on ones actions helped the process of learning.

Reflective practice helps people move through the cycle of learning. The progression of competency model is often used by training and development professionals to describe the stages of learning new skills:

- Unconscious incompetence
- Conscious competence
- Conscious competence
- Unconscious competence

The disadvantage with this model is that it assumes that the final of the fourth stage -Unconscious competence- is the last. In fact various management psychologists have challenged this view, pointing out that there are stages of learning beyond competency or 'soundness'. Reynolds (1965) for example talks about 'Relative Mastery' and 'Soundness' as being further levels of competence, finishing in 'Second nature'. Paraphrasing Reynolds, she identifies the stages of learning as:
I particularly like the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model of learning that describes the stages of learning at five levels:

1 Novice - Rigid adherence to taught rules or plans
   - No discretionary judgment
2 Advanced Beginner - Depends on guidelines for action
   - Situational perception still limited
3 Competent - Conscious deliberate planning of action
   - Standardised and routinised procedures
4 Proficient - Perceives deviations from the normal pattern
   - Uses maxims for guidance, able to take decisions according to the situation
5 Expert - No longer relies on rules, guidelines or maxims
   - Intuitive grasp of situations based on deep tacit understanding

How and when can reflective practice be used?

Quite often we do not consciously distinguish between what makes one person 'proficient' and another 'expert'. In my experience reflective practice is a particularly useful tool in this context. Therefore it is not only relevant to people who are learning but also to people who are competent but still want to improve.

The beauty of reflective practice is that it can be used as a learning opportunity across a range of activities, projects and experiences. The length of time that it takes to undertake the technique can vary from half an hour to several days, depending on the size of the activity undertaken, the number of people involved and the time available. For example I recently facilitated a session on learning at the end of a large international project for an advertising agency. This involved eight people for a day. In the same week I also used the technique in a two hour coaching session with a senior executive to help him better understand the impact of his decisions and behaviours and the subsequent course of action.
Reflective practice can be undertaken by the person or persons involved in an activity using a set of prompt questions. Likewise it is a tool that trained coaches and facilitators can use to facilitate a process of self awareness, learning and change.

From personal experience, I believe that reflective practice is best done as a facilitated process. The facilitator can then both support and challenge individuals. It also helps avoid the denial and justification that can occur when people reflect on their actions.

**What are the skills needed for reflective practice?**

Reflective practice encourages individuals to question what, why and how we do things and what, why and how people with whom we interact also do things. It is a process that seeks to understand the underlying mechanisms and rationale behind behaviour. It encourages the individual to view their own activities and their outputs from different perspectives by seeking feedback from others. The purpose is to create greater awareness and understanding of the reasons for and impact of ones actions. It is a process of questioning assumptions, keeping an open mind and asking 'what if'?

The resulting conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis are designed to generate alternatives, facilitate choices and challenge assumptions.

The skills needed therefore for the coach or facilitator to be effective in of reflective practice revolve around support : listening, encouraging reflection, recognising achievements, offering help, providing motivational feedback and challenge: questioning, promoting different ways of doing things, providing developmental feedback, seeking improvement.

**What is the process of reflective practice?**

The steps in reflective practice will vary according to the situation. They generally involve:

- When facilitated, contracting with the individual / group about what they hope to achieve from the reflective practice. Clarifying the role of the facilitator and the group participants.
• Gathering data on what has / is occurring (not just from the participant/s in the reflective practice session but where possible from others involved such as colleagues, customers, direct reports etc)

• Analysing what has worked well and what needs to improve, stop or change

• Committing to a set of changed actions and behaviours

• Putting these into practice

• Reviewing the effectiveness of these actions

In many respects therefore, reflective practice is linked to the action learning cycle:

Reflective practice has many similarities with action learning. One way of representing the cycle of Action Learning (inspired by the approach of John Heron and Peter Reason) is captured in this diagram.

What is the link to learning practice and Learning Needs Analysis?

The output of reflective practice should be a greater awareness of ones behaviour and actions and their impact on others. Also the result of reflective practice is often the identification of development areas - aspects of ones skills, knowledge or behaviour that need to be enhanced. This learning can apply both to teams as well as individuals. Either way, reflective practice should focus on what the team or individual needs to continue and what needs to change.

It is essential, just like with other techniques for identifying learning needs, that the individual take responsibility for their own development. Some of the learning and development requirements may be met by the organisation such as the provision of courses or funding for professional development. Alternatively the individual together with their line manager may identify opportunities on or off the job for development. Reflective practice should then
encourage the individual to think about what they have gained from the development they have undertaken and what they need to do next.

**Key Learning Points**

- Reflective practice is the process of reflecting on action that has been taken, either during an activity or after an activity itself. If
- Donald Shôn first coined the phrase 'Reflective Practice'. He argued that the ability to reflect on action was part of the process of continuous learning.
- Reflective practice can be used as a learning opportunity across a range of activities, projects and experiences by individuals and teams
- Reflective practice is best undertaken by a facilitator or coach who can support and challenge the learning
- The outcomes of reflective practice can help inform learning and development needs

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**References**


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