

Watson, M. (2008). *Reflective Writing*, Building your portfolio: the CILIP guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Facet Pub., 21 – 26.

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# 3

## Reflective writing

### What is reflective writing?

Reflective writing is the formal, or informal, recording of your thoughts. As Andrew Booth says, reflective practice requires that you learn from your practical professional experience (Booth and Brice, 2004). So first we have to learn to reflect on our learning and our professional practice, then we need to record that reflection in writing. By recording the reflection we formalize the process and have a record of our development.

### Reflective practice

Those of you who are fans of Harry Potter will remember a wonderful magical object that Albus Dumbledore owned called the Pensieve. Professor Dumbledore could place memories in this stone basin and then relive them, taking Harry with him so he could learn from that memory. This is a good example of reflection (Watton, Collings and Moon, n.d.) and underscores the importance of learning from experience. It is not sufficient just to have an experience, you need to reflect on that experience and evaluate it, and then apply that knowledge to another experience or activity:

Deep and sustained learning – becoming able to do something you couldn't do before – only comes through experience . . . Experience on its own, however, is not enough. Experience needs to be reflected upon and made sense of

to create knowledge, and this knowledge deepened when it is applied in fresh situations.

(Thomson, 2006)

So before reflective writing comes reflection. As part of your CPD you should try to get into the habit of being reflective. Thinking about the task you have just done, the course you have been on, the discussion you have had that day at work, the article you have just read, and so on. Any activity that is part of your work life should be reflected upon, and lessons learned. Of course, as Keith Trickey reveals later in this chapter, reflection can also become a part of your personal development as well as your professional development.

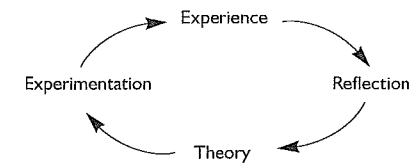
### Evaluation

Most of us are familiar with evaluation forms which are handed out at the end of a workshop. This is to enable the workshop leader to reflect on the success or otherwise of that particular session and plan any changes. While working in higher education I often felt that our students suffered from evaluation fatigue, as at the end of year they had evaluation forms for every module and for the course. But for the staff they were an important element in planning or revising the course or individual module for the following year. I also used to try to carry out my own evaluation, by recording my feelings about the elements in the course – what went well or what could have been done better. If other colleagues were involved in teaching the module, then they would add their feedback. I also updated my knowledge of the subject. The personal evaluation, colleagues' feedback, student feedback and other evidence (my reading or courses attended) all contributed to the reflection and then, hopefully, the improvement of the module or course.

### The learning cycle

Most writers on reflective practice refer to Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1986). This is normally represented as a learning cycle

although I think it should really be seen as a learning spiral:



Or simply:

You do something  
 You think about it  
 You draw conclusions from the experience  
 You plan how you can do it better  
 You do it better . . .

When I have been asked to speak at CILIP Qualification events or in mentor training sessions I have always joked and said there are two words burned onto my forehead – ‘So what’? This is what we should ask ourselves all the time. What have I learned from that activity and what am I going to do as a result? This forms the basis of being a reflective practitioner.

### Reflective writing

Many of us find it quite difficult to write reflectively; like most skills, the earlier you start and the more practice you have, the easier it becomes. Andrew Gibbons, whose website is an invaluable tool for anyone interested in reflective writing, has been keeping a learning log for many years. I attended a talk by Andrew and actually saw the huge number of files he has now amassed. All his entries were written by hand and he says now it has become a way of life for him. He suggests using a template (available for free download on [www.andrewgibbons.co.uk](http://www.andrewgibbons.co.uk)) to get started and not to record every little thing, but to be selective.

### Keeping a learning log

You can choose to keep a log or diary and complete short entries each day, or perhaps use a weekly diary. But don't just describe or list what happened. Ask yourself questions (as in the learning cycle above); if possible talk to other people and get their perspective; collect evidence if appropriate.

A colleague of mine used to keep a daybook; in this she would make notes from any meetings or discussions she was involved in, or from any articles, etc., that she had read, and at the end of the week she would record any specific learning outcomes or actions. I was not so organized until I bought myself an A4 Filofax diary; in that I had the list of the day's events but I also made a record of other important thoughts or actions, either handwritten or word-processed, and a copy of any other documents or at least a reference to where those documents were filed. The main problem was that by the end of the academic term it was extremely heavy! But I admit it was very useful to be able to go back and check the record. So much better than trying to rely on memory.

If you keep a diary or logbook you will find that it is so much easier to include reflective writing in your portfolio. For enthusiastic bloggers, why not refine your blogging style and use that as an example of reflective writing?

### Reflective writing for your portfolio

The personal statement in your portfolio is clearly the place where you are required to reflect on your learning and development. You are expected not just to describe what you have done, but to analyse any developmental activity, reflect on the outcomes of the activity and consider how you might apply that learning back into the workplace. So before you write that personal statement you have to reflect. If you have tried to start the process as a reflective practitioner from the time you registered it will be so much easier. Hopefully, you will have kept a learning log or a diary and you will have evidence of development, so then you will be able to review that reflection and write your personal statement.

### A daily routine

So how can you start the process? You get into the habit of reviewing any developmental activity and recording your feelings. You can then add a record of discussion with other people or notes from books, reports or articles you read on the subject. There are many ways in which you can incorporate reflective writing into your daily routine:

- If you give a presentation, evaluate it; ask colleagues their opinions, formally or informally, record how you felt and what you would do differently.
- If you go on a visit, record your ideas and note how you could apply anything you saw in your own place of work.
- If you go on a training course, make a note of how useful it was and what skills you were able to apply in the work place.
- Use the CPD audit sheet on CILIP's website.
- Keep an annotated diary or weekly journal.

It is important to make a record as soon as you can after the event and not rely on memory. But it is also crucial that you revisit the record and then make a note of any subsequent developments or feelings you may have. It sounds a huge task but, as Keith Trickey and Andrew Gibbons both point out, it should become second nature after a while. This record of your self-evaluation and analysis will be a personal record and you are not expected to share it with anyone else. You may wish to discuss it with your mentor so you can clarify your thoughts.

The record will provide you with a wonderful source of information for your portfolio.

When you come to start compiling your portfolio much of the hard work will have been done. You will have a record of your reflection on all aspects of your development. You will have supporting evidence. You will then need to select and organize the material which will demonstrate that you meet the assessment criteria.

### Hints and tips

- ☛ At the end of the day/week record any substantial learning or developmental activity.
- ☛ Discuss the activity with a colleague or mentor and make a note of any interesting points.
- ☛ Collect any supporting material such as handouts, agendas, flyers, programmes etc.
- ☛ Use the CILIP CPD audit sheet.
- ☛ Keep any memos, letters or feedback on your performance.
- ☛ Keep any relevant survey results, but add your own notes.
- ☛ Be honest with yourself.
- ☛ Set a realistic time aside to reflect.
- ☛ Use travelling time to record your reflections.
- ☛ Record your reflections in a diary or make sure you number the records in some way.
- ☛ Revisit and review the entries but don't change them – add thoughts if necessary.

### Case study 3.1

#### Keith Trickey: Approaches to reflective writing

Sitting down to write is always a very self-conscious act because of the formality involved in presenting our thoughts as text. The conventions of sentence structure and grammar can be ignored in the spoken word, as that huge range of ancillary activity – intonation and gesture – can happily clarify meaning. In text the words themselves have to carry the full weight of the communication, and this is the case whether you work with a pen or a keyboard. So what is the advantage of writing in reflection and how is it best practised?

In briefly reviewing written reflection I will do so from the broad perspective of reflection as a personal development activity, not simply as a required element in professional development. In my own experience professional development is simply one aspect in the complex of activities that keeps an individual moving forward to engage in their life in all its

varied aspects. What works in the general case also works, helpfully, in that specific pocket of development named professional development.

### Daily 'mind dump'

The most unstructured form of reflective writing is what Julia Cameron (1997) refers to as 'pages' and involves a regular commitment (for as long as it is useful) to produce two or three sides of written A4 each morning (yes, every morning) as a 'mind dump' to allow you to deal with whatever you need to deal with before you start your day. The discipline of sitting each morning to write is really helpful. Sometimes your ideas sprint out as you cover your allotted task in a matter of minutes – your hand struggling to keep up with your racing mind. Sometimes it is 'with painful steps and slow' that the text drags itself out from under the pen; often these sessions provide very helpful information on how you are and what you need to do. The purpose of 'pages' is self-contained. You simply write, and notice as you write what you write (the content) and how you write (emotional element); there is no requirement to move beyond this as the in-process reflection can be carried forward and your mind cleared to allow you to be more effective for the rest of the day.

I used this method for about three years and during that time it proved very useful in giving me clarity about the competing pressures I was working with and enabled me to work more effectively as I had started my day with a written review/reflection on how I was. At the moment I do not do 'pages'. When I need to I will start again – and stop again when they have served their purpose.

### Focused Writing

A different approach to reflective writing is offered by Joyce Chapman (1991). Her approach pushes the reflective element more to the fore. Initially there is the requirement to write about something specific in whatever way is appropriate. You could write a series of well articulated lucid paragraphs, it could be a short poem, it might be a series of anguished bullet points – all in CAPITAL LETTERS to show your passion!

The style you adopt should mirror the task you are undertaking. If it is about your relationship with somebody else, it may be helpful to write it as a dialogue, allowing you to explore the other person's voice. Having completed your writing you then leave a space, because you will be coming back to it later. After a couple of days you re-read the passage and then write a feedback statement to yourself. In reading what you have written you take the role of a supportive friend, and it is with that view that you write the feedback, giving a different perspective on the initial writing. I enjoyed this approach to reflective writing as it allows you to move into the mentor role and be self-nurturing as opposed to being your most powerful critic.

### 'Three Whats'

If you need to deal with an incident or issue quickly and get some broader thinking round it, then the Three Whats? (Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001) is a helpful tool to use. There are three basic components to the approach and these are the three questions What? So What? Now What? The first What is basically a statement of what has happened. This is followed by So What? Here the significance of the incident is worked out in terms of where it fits in the larger picture of your development. For example: What – asking permission to be allowed to attend a professional development event without having to take leave – may not sound earth shattering. However, in the context of So What? it may be the first time that you have asked your organization to support you in this way – having previously taken leave when attending such events. Now that indicates a significant shift in self-valuing in the workplace and it is important that you notice it. Now you can move on to Now What? This gives the action-centred/future focus to your reflection. So what will this change (now acknowledged) enable you to do (differently) in the future? This allows you to consider future possibilities from the secure basis of acknowledged development.

### Self-development through reflective writing

I have always found writing a fascinating process, as it allows me to gain a much more useful perspective on my thinking when I can see it written out on a page. This is a powerful advantage for reflective work. When ideas and thoughts are buzzing round in your head they bump into each other and can easily be hijacked or crushed by the continuous activity of thought. When you write about them you have to focus on specific concerns and give them your attention; also, when those thoughts or issues are down on paper they take on a more solid reality which has a certain separation from your thought process. You can then literally change your mind as you review what you have written. If you write in a slightly self-conscious way about something you have achieved, when you read it through you can simply acknowledge that you have done a good job: this can loop back to build your self-efficacy and expectation around further potential. Without capturing this as text, this possibility for self-development could be lost, as your old view of self continues failing to acknowledge the professional progress you have made.

If you keep your reflective writing in an A4 notebook and watch it accumulate over a period of time (in my case a series of books covering about ten years) it becomes a useful resource, a way of tracking progress, giving insights on developments and on unhelpful habits that are still being worked on.

Dipping into my own archive I found the following back in February 1998. I had been through a very rough day at work and in my personal life. I had then travelled down to London because I was delivering training the next day. In the early evening I set and answered a brief series of questions:

- Was I 'suffering'? – Yes, I was feeling hurt and neglected.
- Was it useful? – Yes, it opened further areas for consideration.
- Did I end up damaged? – No, I kept things going.
- Did I 'die' of it? – No, it was not that important.

Two hours later I added the simple feedback statement:

'We survived!'

The reflective process worked by overstating my sense of the situation; it allowed my natural humour and playful irony to kick in and clear things.

Reflective writing did not come easily to me – my degree was in English Literature, I have always been fascinated with language and I had become expert at hiding behind words, so I could spin elegant text which flashed and impressed but actually had no reflective value. I failed to honestly engage with the topic to hand and instead built an elegant mask with the effort going into the creation of an accomplished piece of writing rather than honestly exploring my condition.

It may take time to find your voice or range of voices in reflective writing, and that simply requires patience and practice. Approached with a healthy curiosity about the variety of views you have about your own activity, reflective writing can become an exciting journey in self-exploration. Something that Alan Watts expresses far better than I can:

The point, therefore of these arts, is doing them rather than the accomplishments. But more than this the real joy of them lies in what turns up unintentionally in the course of practice, just as the joy of travel is not nearly so much in getting where one wants to go as in the unsought surprises which occur on the journey.

(Watts, 1957)

Your initial focus for reflective writing may be the narrow confines of a requirement to achieve professional acknowledgement by a professional body such as CILIP. However, human beings are notoriously dynamic in the way they work with their intelligence, and this process could happily spill over to allow you to glean powerful insights and learning which you will generalize to enhance your wider life.

All you need to do is start writing, and the process can begin.