

# Learning through Reflection

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Reflective learning is a means for helping you learn from your experience by thinking about that experience and making sense of it. We can consider two kinds of reflective learning:

1. **Reflective learning** in which you look back over the results of some activity to determine what worked well, what didn't, what could be changed, and what barriers there might be to implementing such change. Such learning generally looks at what happened in relation to what was intended, whether the consequences of specific activities were intended or unintended, and what might need to be changed in the future.
2. **Self-reflective Learning** in which you look back at your own experiences in order to understand what you did, what the consequences were of what you did, whether those consequences were intended or unintended, and what you might want to change in the future.

The processes are the same for both types of learning. The difference between them lies in the focus and the emotional level involved. While both processes can be emotionally charged, self-reflective learning is more likely to be highly emotionally charged, and therefore easier to avoid, than reflective learning.

The one essential that you need to remember about reflective and self-reflective learning is that it must never focus on judging the worth of actions or consequences. Once you start thinking in terms of whether some action was good or bad, you'll stop learning and start defending yourself. You can say to yourself, "I did X"; you must avoid saying, even to yourself, "I did the wrong thing."

We are all "experiencing" all the time. That is, our sensory system is constantly taking in information about our internal and external worlds. This information is then processed through mental activities. The sensory information is first processed into images, sounds, and sensations through unconscious mental processes. Then, through conscious processes, those images, sounds and sensations are assigned meanings, and words are used to describe these meanings. The use of words introduces generalizations in our awareness of our experiences.

The mental processes that turn our experiences first into images, sounds and sensations and then into words appear to account for less than 20 percent of our mental activity. In reflective learning we are interested in what is happening in the remaining 80 percent of our mental activity.

The process of reflective learning includes the following components:

- Consciously paying attention to, and becoming aware of, more of our day-to-day experiences.

- Increasing our awareness of how we turn our experiences into images, sounds and sensation and of what we tend to ignore or distort in the process.
- Increasing our awareness of how our immediate experiences connect to the images, sounds, sensations and words we have already stored away in our memories from our past experiences.
- Discovering the meanings we give to these connections between past and immediate experiences, and
- Making these meanings explicit and conscious through telling others about them.

There are some basic strategies for carrying out each of these components of reflective learning.

1. You must know what you want to learn. In identifying what you want to learn, the trick is to identify yourself as a learner – as someone who could benefit from doing some reflective learning.
2. Next you need to let yourself in on how you normally go about your reflective learning. Everyone does it although not everyone pays attention to it. You may mull things over as you drive your car, or while you are doing some routine household task. Or you may let your mind wander as you are doing your physical fitness routine or just while you are walking somewhere. Some people do much of their reflective learning in the few moments just before they drop off to sleep or just when they wake up. If you don't have a time when you reflective on things, then you will need to make some time for yourself. Pick a convenient time when you can just mull over what you have learned.
3. You will need to develop an "observing other" – a very small "person" who sits on one shoulder or behind one ear and observes everything that happens from both the outside looking in and the inside looking out. The observing other needs to have a sense of humour and to not get overwhelmed by your emotional responses to whatever information you uncover. This "observing other" records details of experiences without ignoring or distorting anything.
4. You can help the process by attending more closely to your own experiences. You can do this by keeping a journal or diary, looking through photos, drawings or notes that remind you of your experiences. You can let your observing other in on these processes and let him or her do some of the recording of things.
5. You need to generate a lot of information about the details of your experiences – both past experiences and immediate experiences. To do this, you can brainstorm a list of things that you recall from your experiences. It sometimes helps to first brainstorm a list

about what did happen, who was involved, what was said or done, and how you felt; and then brainstorm a list about what didn't happen, who wasn't involved, what wasn't said or done, and how you didn't feel. This may sound foolish but there are often details in the negated version of an experience that get overlooked or distorted in the stored memory of experiences. Again let your observing other help out in this process. Listen to the small voice that likes to comment on (but not judge) what you are thinking or doing.

6. Set aside any concerns or expectations that you might have that this process will result in something “constructive” or that you will end up with a “product.” Place no expectations on yourself.
7. You need to suspend logical, rational thinking and verbal ways of knowing for a short period of time and attend to the stream of information you have generated in step 5. Logical, rational, verbal ways of knowing include all attempts to develop ideas that are reasonable. Temporarily get rid of the parent or sergeant-major in your head who is trying to tell you what is right or wrong; let your observing other have some fun with the details.
8. Review all the information at your disposal – from your lists, from your records, from your observing other. Then just let your mind drift. Let yourself be aware of your feelings, of stray thoughts that do not seem to belong, of the unusual or unexpected images (or whatever) that float into your consciousness. Sometimes you can make things more deliberate by turning things upside down or inside out, by looking at them through the wrong end of the telescope. As you identify connections or stray ideas, note them down without judging their logic or practicality. The reflective process is not just “thinking” in the sense of recalling what happened, solving problems, reorganizing ideas or making decisions; it is much broader and includes identifying connections among different experiences. It involves identifying hunches, feelings, analogies, “crazy” ideas, “half-baked” ideas, intuitions, dreams, images, and so on.
9. You are looking for connections that are surprising, that make you say “Ah-ha” or “Oh no”. Write down any such connections and then go back to your drifting. You can come back to your connections later.
10. Now, go back over your list of connections and explore each one. What does each tell you about your experiences? Do the connections that you identified say anything about other experiences – immediate or past? If you can generalize your connections – that is, if it seems to be true for several different experiences – then you need to assess it.
  - a. Some connections are neutral and do not necessarily lead anywhere.
  - b. Some may provide you with ideas about how you can manage future situations.
  - c. Some ideas may lead to new ways of looking at the world and eventually to more change.
  - d. Some may lead you to a rational statement about what you have learned.

11. Be prepared to share at least some of your connections with others. Let them help you flesh out the details and make your connection more specific.

As you practice reflective and self-reflective learning, you will begin to develop some skill. Keep a journal or diary in which you make a note of some of the more interesting ideas that flow from your reflective and self-reflective activities – we suggest a book format because post-it notes tend to get lost over time. However, if you are a note collector, find a place where you can store your notes until you are ready to use them.

When you find the same ideas coming up over and over again, then you'll know you have identified something important about your experience.