

Annex 3 An introduction to reflective practice

A key element of VEPR is its focus on reflective practice. This annex provides an introduction to the concept of reflective practice, its role in training and development of professional practice, and how this relates to competency in evaluation practice.

What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schön 1983). According to one definition it involves "paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively. This leads to developmental insight" (Cochran-Smith et al 1999). A key rationale for reflective practice is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; deliberate reflection on experience is essential.

Reflective practice as a core element of professional practice

The importance of 'reflective practice' was promoted during the 1980's by Donald Schön in relation to discussions about what constituted good 'professional' practice, at a time when there was a move to identify the 'competency base' for various occupational groups. Identifying core competencies involved undertaking a functional analysis of role or task (or whole occupation), breaking this down into 'functional units and the units into elements, each of which has to be separately assessed to cover a range of situations according to a list of performance criteria.' (Eraut 1994).

How far this process could be applied to professional practice was subject of considerable debate. Although professional practice generally involves a set of practical skills, it also includes other elements, such as a set of formal theories and values, and practice being restricted to members of a professional body, which allows for professional and ethical oversight. One area of debate related to how the acquisition of practical skills related to the underlying theoretical and value base, which also linked with wider discussions about how practical abilities (often implicit) related to explicit (conceptual or theoretical) learning. (e.g. Polanyi 1966, Kolb 1984). Schön highlighted a central tension between what he described as the 'high ground' of academic rigour and the 'lowland of messy practice'. Bridging this gap, he suggested, required more than the mechanical application of competencies, and the application of 'professional artistry', an artistry which should be informed by 'reflective practice'.

This involves moving between learning, reflection and action, and developing the 'art of problem framing, an art of implementation, and an art of improvisation'. Reflection in practice and reflection on action (a double feedback loop) were essential, he argued, in the development of advanced professional practice, particularly in a changing and uncertain world where practice has to be constantly reassessed in the light of changing external requirements.

Various attempts had been made to identify different 'types' of professional practice, such as Bines' (1992) distinction between practical, expert and reflective practitioners. Jones and Joss (1995) sought to link these distinctions to different approaches to professional development. Training for the 'practical professional', for example, relies heavily on 'learning-by-doing', with little explicit reflection or abstraction, while training for reflective practitioner learning involves an experiential process of doing, observing,

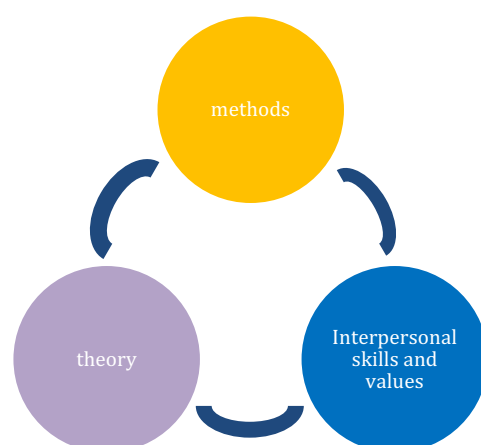
reflecting, conceptualising and experimenting. This, they argued, was particularly important when dealing with the complexity, variability and uncertainty associated with working in human services. Thompson (2002) similarly argued that human problems are typically too complex to be solved by the simple application of technical solutions. This is perhaps why social work and teaching appear to have led the way in developing a 'reflective practice' approach to professionalisation.

Reflective practice as a core evaluation capability

How far evaluation itself is a 'professional' practice (and what kind of professional practice it is) has been subject of considerable debate. Picciotto (2011) in his review of these debates notes a link between these and how the term 'evaluation' is defined. Some definitions he argues, place a strong emphasis on technological and methodological aspects quoting as an example of this, Rossi et al.'s (2004) definition of evaluation as 'the systematic, rigorous and meticulous application of scientific methods to assess the design'. Others, however, emphasise the 'human service' dimension, such as the evaluator's role in supporting learning in organisations and programmes. He quotes Cronbach et al's 1980 description of the evaluator as 'an educator (whose) success is to be judged by what others learn'.

Different orientations towards the evaluator role and its professionalisation were also reflected in discussions within the UK Evaluation Society between 2009 and 2012 about the pros and cons of establishing a framework of evaluation competencies. The outcome of this was the 2012 UK Evaluation Society's Framework of Evaluation Capabilities (<http://evaluation.org.uk/index.php/about-us/publications/77-ukes-capabilities-framework>) which covers both a set of technical and methodological skills, and a set of interpersonal skills, qualities and dispositions that are required for effective practice. The latter include reference to the evaluator being able to adapt to changing circumstances, exercise sound, rigorous and fair judgments, display independence of mind and integrity and display self-knowledge.

As noted in wider debates about professional practice, in order to practice effectively, the evaluator has to bring together a set of practical skills (methods of data collection, analysis and reporting), a theoretical approach (the evaluation model used, with an understanding of its underpinning epistemology) and the interpersonal skills required to put these into practice. The diagram below illustrates these three elements.



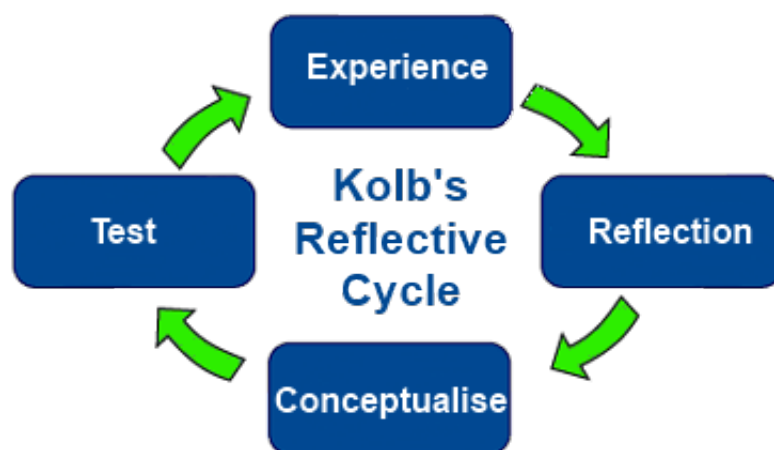
As noted by Schön, bringing these together requires a process of self reflection. It requires a process of planning and action, and taking time to reflect on the effectiveness of the action, recalibrating this (refining the methods or evaluation approaches to use, or reviewing the quality of relationships with clients, those delivering or receiving the

intervention being evaluated), as new information comes to light or external circumstances change.

Taking this further, if we take a definition of evaluation which includes one of supporting learning, then the role of evaluator also needs to be able to support participants in the organisations, programmes and projects in a similar process of reflecting on and learning from their own activities. In order to do this, evaluators themselves will need to hone their own reflective skills.

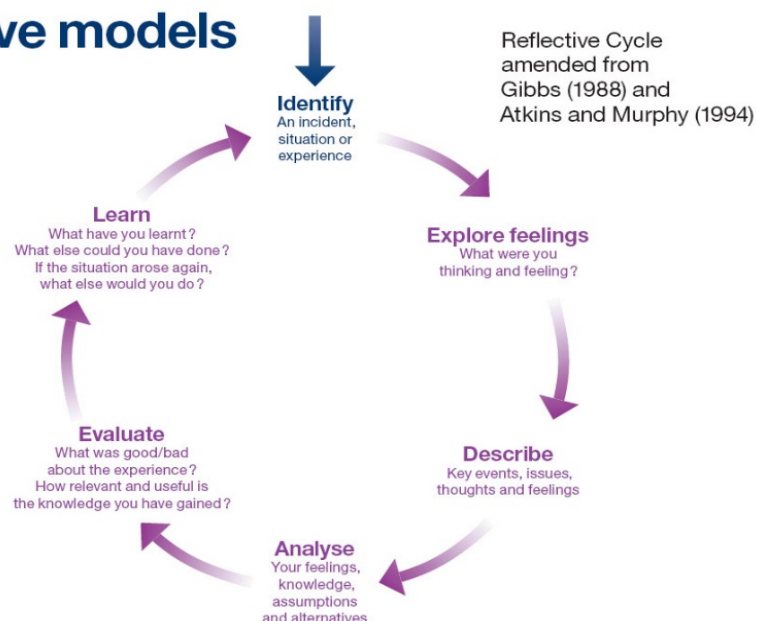
Key steps in the Process of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice generally involves going through a number of steps or stages. A number of different versions of these are in circulation, but most contain the following key elements outlined in Kolb's original model of a reflective cycle, which sought to bring to the surface and articulate elements of an experience which may not initially have been apparent.



The following, rather more detailed, version is useful, as it provides a very specific set of issues and questions for consideration at each stage of the process.

Reflective models



This has also been used as the basis for the portfolio template provided as part of the VEPR applicants' application form, i.e. candidates are asked to describe a project which

illustrates the capability being explored and in the review are then asked to reflect on the following questions:

| | Reflection |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Evaluation (1): | What went particularly well in this element of the project? What was particularly good about the way you addressed it, and handled your role? |
| Evaluation (2) | What was challenging in this particular element of the project? Was there anything you felt you might have done differently? |
| Analysis: | What sense can you make of the situation? What theoretical or external body of knowledge can help you make sense of the experience? |
| Conclusions (general): | What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken? |
| Conclusions (specific): | What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or ways of working? |
| Personal Action plans: | What have you learnt from this experience? Does it indicate any additional training or development you would like to undertake to support you going forward? |

Reflective practice and active listening

Reflective practice can be undertaken by an individual, as a group, or in a one to one session between an individual and their supervisor or trainer. If it is conducted with another person, then it is important that the person supporting the process (whether a peer, a supervisor or trainer) is able to listen and support the person reflecting in an engaged, but impartial manner. In this respect, the concept of 'active listening' is useful. This helps in:

- Building rapport
- Establishing and building trust
- Creating feelings of acceptance, safety and understanding
- Increasing clarity/ understanding
- Increasing self esteem

Qualities of a good active listener include

- Empathy
- Acceptance
- Genuineness/ authenticity

These three core qualities can be achieved through being self-aware, non-judgmental, calm, not interrupting, listening to all, positive body language, giving encouraging responses and by having a clear sense of boundaries. Listening is a two-way process of listening and responding. The active listener needs to be able to pick up on the content of a conversation but also the way it is being conveyed, how the person is feeling and how they are experiencing what is happening to them.

There are a number of specific techniques that help support the process of active listening. These include:

- Allowing silences
- Asking relevant and open questions
- Being reflective
- Listening for feelings as well as facts
- Not jumping to conclusions!
- Paying attention to the speaker
- Indicating that you have heard what the participant has said (verbally and non-verbally)
- Asking questions for clarification, to explore something in more depth
- Recapping what you have heard the participant say
- Respecting the participant' s expertise and knowledge of their particular situation (which may be different to your own)
- Asserting your own opinions respectfully (use first person)
- Not providing solutions!

Reflective Practice Criteria

In order for the reviewee's name to be listed on the Society's website reviewers will decide whether the reviewee is able to:

- describe at least two events/situations and their context with sufficient detail, but concisely enough, to communicate the main points to the reviewer
- identify essential elements of the issues chosen for reflection
- link these to one or more specific capabilities
- describe their own thoughts and feelings about the issue
- ask searching questions for themselves about their experience (rather than looking to the reviewer for advice)
- answer searching questions from the reviewer concisely in a way that demonstrates a capacity to reflect
- reflect on what underlying frames of reference (evaluation theories and frameworks) they were using
- draw implications /conclusions from their reflection and consider how it links to chosen capabilities or others that have arisen.
- outline concrete learning goals and plans for future action.

References

Bolton G (2010) [2001] *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development* (3rd Ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications. P. xix. ISBN 9781848602113. OCLC 458734364.

Cochran-Smith M and Lytle SL (1999) *Relationships of knowledge and practice: teacher learning in communities*. *Review of Research in Education*. 24 (1): 249–305.

Cronbach LJ & Associates (1980) *Toward Reform of Program Evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Eraut M (1994) *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*. London: Falmer Press.

Jones S and Joss R (1995) Models of professionalism. In: Yelloly M and Henkel M (eds) (1995) *Learning and Teaching in Social Work - Towards Reflective Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Kolb DA (1984) *Experiential learning*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Picciotto R (2011) The logic of evaluation professionalism. *Evaluation* 17(2) 165-180 Sage.

Loughran JJ (2002) Effective reflective practice: in search of meaning in learning about teaching (PDF) *Journal of Teacher Education* 53 (1): 33–43.

Polyani M (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Rossi PH, Lipsey MW and Freeman HE (2004) *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* (7th edn.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schön DA (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

Schön DA (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.

Thompson N (1992) *Existentialism and social work*. Avebury, England: Aldershot.

Walker JC (1992) *Standards and partnerships in teaching and teacher education: USA and UK Experience*. Centre for Research in Professional Education. Canberra, Australia: University of Canberra.