

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A GUIDE FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS WRITING REFLECTIONS

What is it?

Reflective practice is where practitioners habitually apply a cycle of self-observation, enquiry and evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they stimulate in themselves and others. The goal is not to address a pre-set problem but to observe and refine behaviour and thinking through a continuous process.

Engaging in reflective practice is thought to enhance self-awareness and to 'tune' practitioners into their own behaviour and its consequences. It is a powerful tool for learning.

In post-graduate study, you may be asked to reflect on your studies, your work practices or both. This is done with the aim of stimulating your learning, enhancing your practice and equipping you with an effective tool for lifelong learning.

There are different types of reflection. Schon (191) identified two types. Reflection-**in**-action is about reflecting on what you are doing while you are doing it. Reflection-**on**-action is reflecting on behaviours and consequences after they have happened. In postgraduate studies, you are likely to be asked to reflect on your learning, thinking or behaviours after they have occurred.

How do you write a reflection?

Your teachers may give you frameworks to follow. If they do not, then four alternatives are provided below. The frameworks described below are Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, Gibb's (1998) reflective cycle, Rolfe et al's (2001) 'What' framework for critical reflection and Daudelin's (1996) framework for learning from experience. You should pick the framework that aligns most closely with your assignment instructions and rubric. This will help you stay on track and stimulate your thinking.

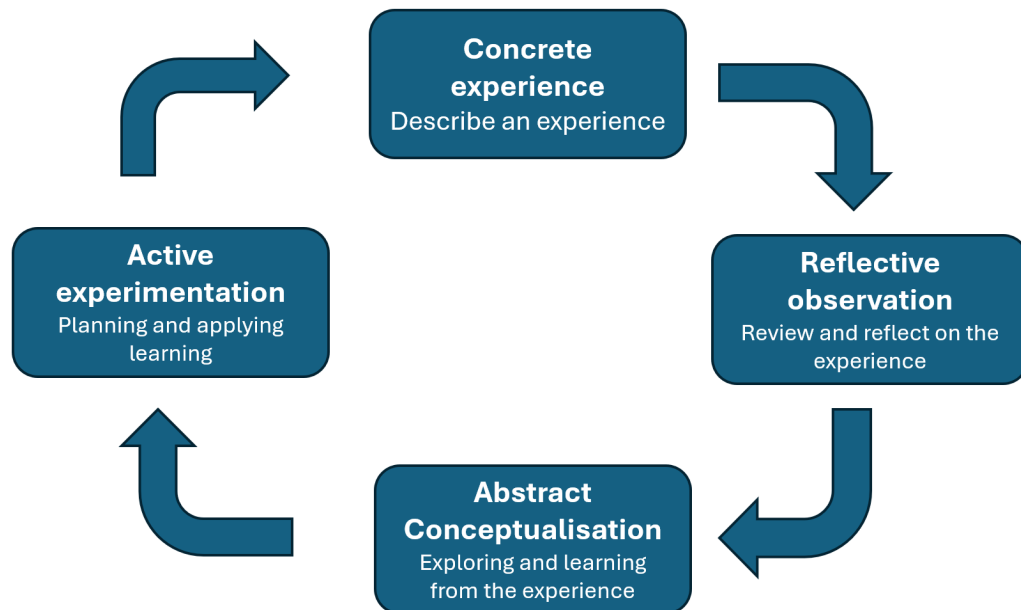
1. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning

This is a 4 stage model of active and experiential learning.

It is most useful when:

- You want to capture learning through repeated cycles of action and reflection.
- You have had practical experiences.
- You want to plan new actions and test them out

- You need to combine theories learnt at university with practical experience at work.



Here are the steps:

Concrete experience

An incident occurs at work or university that gives you cause to stop and think/reflect. It can be something surprising, something that was difficult or an idea that you try out. You will need to describe your experience.

Reflective observation

Your initial reflections after the experience should be captured. You might ask yourself what you were trying to do, what you did do and why you did it.

Abstract conceptualization

This involves exploring your initial reflections in detail and linking them to theory, research and your practitioner knowledge to make sense of what happened. This will

enable you to develop your own theory/understanding and decide whether you need to make a change.

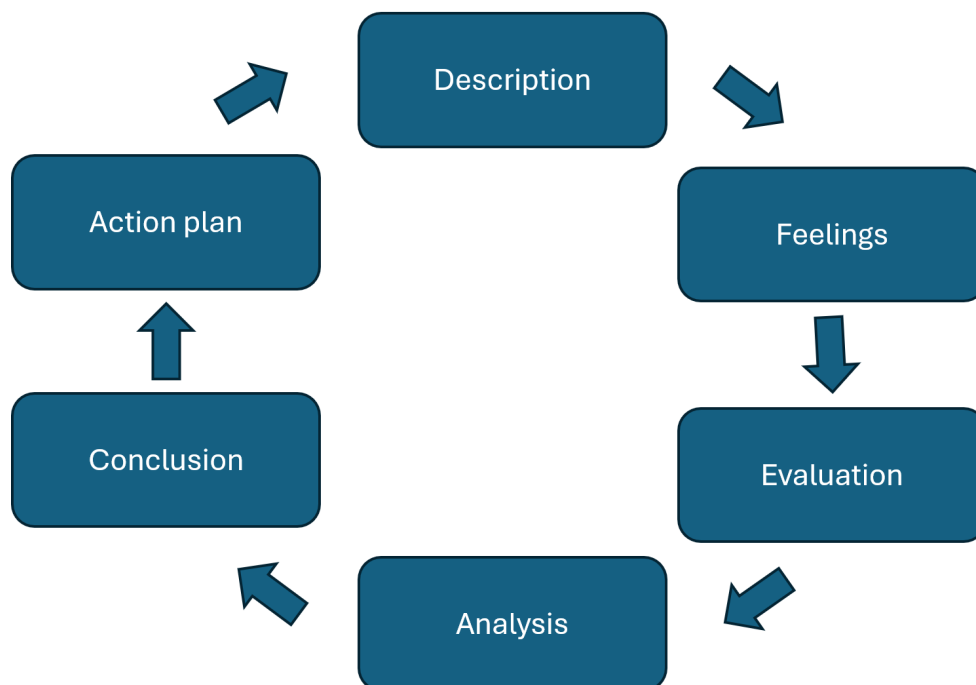
Actively experiment

This stage involves planning a new way of behaving underpinned by your emerging understanding. You then try out your plan, which provides a concrete experience and starts the next cycle of reflection.

2. Gibb's (1998) reflective cycle

This is useful when:

- You want a more detailed structure than Kolb's framework provides.
- You need to think about your emotional as well as cognitive reactions
- When you want to think about your values and how things sit with your moral compass
- When you do not have repeated cycles of reflection and action
- You want to write about an event at university or at work.



Here are the steps:

Description

Here you write about what happened. You might ask yourself: What was I doing at the time? Where was I?, Who else was there and what were they doing? What part did I play? What did I do? What happened?

Feelings

Here you write about your emotional reaction. You might ask yourself: How did I feel before the event started? What was I thinking about at the time? How was I feeling while the event played out? How did other people affect my feelings? How did I feel about the outcome of the event? How was I afterwards? How do I feel about it now?

Evaluation

Here you document objectively what went well or not so well.

Analysing

This is the sensemaking phase where you explore the previous phases and draw on theory and research to build potential explanations. You might ask: What did I do well/badly and why? What did others do well/badly and why? Why did unexpected things happen? How much did I contribute? What held me back/pushed me forward? You might be examining your own assumptions and preconceptions, or you might be applying theories.

Conclusions

Having analysed the event you can now draw some conclusions and summarise what you need to improve.

Action plan

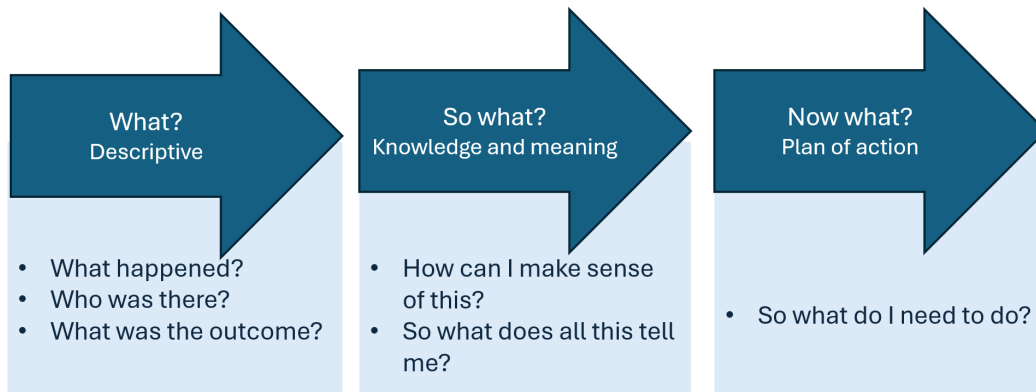
In the last stage you will describe your plan for changing your practice. Ask yourself, what will I do differently and how will I bring this change about?

3. Rolfe et al's (2001) What model.

Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001) propose a simple but robust approach to reflection that involves answering 3 questions.

This is useful when:

- You want a simple and practical model
- You are reflecting on your practice or learning
- You have a limited word count
- You do not need to focus at length on feelings



Here are the steps:

What?

This is the descriptive part of the framework. You might ask yourself: what happened? What were the reactions of others? What were my reactions? What was the issue? What was good or challenging about the issue? What feelings did it bring up? What was I expecting? What was I trying to do? What was good/bad about the outcome and process?

So what?

This is where you can bring in your theory and research to explain the event described above and explore its implications. You might ask yourself: So what does this teach me about myself? So what does this teach me about the knowledge or preconceptions or motivations that influenced me? So what literature/ theories or standards align (or not) with or explain this experience? So what should I have done? So what does this tell me about the relationship between the people involved? So what caused it? So what might the knock effects be? So what might happen next time if I do nothing?

Now what?

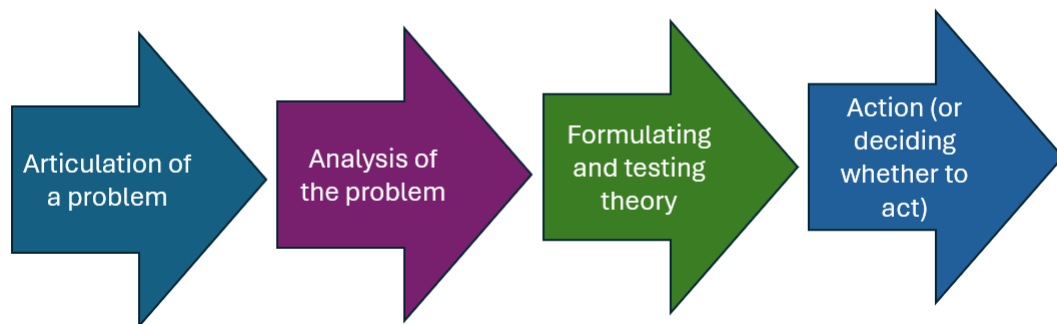
This is where you can plan for the future. You might ask yourself: Now what do I need to do to improve things? Now what will I do differently? Now what broader issues do I need to look into before my own actions can make a difference? Now what can I do to use this learning elsewhere? Now what have I learnt that will inform my career? Now what do I need to improve? Now, what do I need to learn? Now what help do I need to enable me to change?

4. Daudelin (1996) Learning from experience through reflection

Daudelin (1996) developed this model with business managers in mind. She suggests it can be used as a powerful tool for enabling managers to take responsibility for their own learning. In a small study she demonstrated that an hour spent on reflection significantly increased learning for people reflecting alone or with a coach compared when they were compared with people who did not reflect at all or reflected within peer groups.

It is useful when:

- You need to think deeply about an event or problem
- You have had practical experience
- You want to generate hypotheses about cause and effect
- You want to plan new actions



Here are the stages in Daudelin's model:

Articulation of a problem

This stage involves defining the problem and explaining to yourself exactly what the scope and nature of the problem is. The problem may be triggered by doubts, puzzlement or frustration. You might ask: What occurred? What did I think, feel, see? What was important?

Analysis of the problem

This stage consists of a 'search for possibilities'. It may involve searching your memory for similar situations. It could involve imagining how someone else might handle this situation. It is a search for information that might give you an insight. It will generally involve rerunning situations in your mind and looking for clues that might lead you to a truth. You might ask: Why was that important? Why did I feel like that? Why did I act like that?

Formulation and testing of a tentative theory

Your inquiry and analysis will lead you to the next step which is about forming a hypothesis and a theory. (Theory here just means your idea of what and why something happened) You will mentally test your theory by thinking it through and scouring your memory for any events or information that supports or refutes your theory. You might ask: How could I have handled it? How is the different to other situations?

Action (or deciding whether to act)

This stage brings a closure to the cycle and is where Daudelin says true learning occurs. It involves creating new meaning from past events and determining new ways of behaving or of being and acting on them. You might ask: What must I do differently? What should I do now?

Tips for writing reflections in postgraduate study

- Provide a balanced reflection. The descriptive step in each framework is the easiest. Students tend to spend too much time on the description and not enough on the other steps, which are more difficult but more valuable. These later steps involve challenging your thinking, drawing on evidence, interpreting complex situations and learning.
- Write in formal English, don't make it too chatty.
- Show you appreciate the complexities of your situation.
- Write in the first person rather than the 3rd and craft full sentences and paragraphs.
- If you have trouble explaining your logic and conveying the links between your ideas check out this site <https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/transition-signals-writing>
- Be honest. The aim is to help you learn, so be self-critical and open to change.
- Show evidence of critical and creative thinking
- Be cautious, considered, even-handed and humble.
- Include references to show you are scholarly and well-informed.
- Ask your teacher whether you can use AI as your reflective writing coach. If you do use AI do not rely on it too heavily. Make sure that the work you submit is steeped in detail that only you can know, is very well referenced and is realistic in that your analyses and plans are achievable within your role.

References

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Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall.

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