



# The Reflective Practice Guide

**An interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection**

Barbara Bassot

ROUTLEDGE



# THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE GUIDE

*The Reflective Practice Guide* supports all students for whom the process of reflecting on developing knowledge and skills is crucial to successful professional practice. It offers an accessible introduction to a wide range of theories and models that can help you engage more effectively in critical reflection. Illustrated throughout with examples and case studies drawn from a range of interdisciplinary professional contexts, *The Reflective Practice Guide* offers models of practice that can be applied in a variety of settings. Reflective questions in each chapter help you apply ideas to your own professional context.

Drawing on literature from a range of disciplines, key aspects of reflection explored include:

- becoming more self-aware
- the role of writing in reflection
- learning from experience
- learning from positives and negatives
- emotions and processing feelings
- bringing assumptions to the surface
- learning from feedback
- reflecting in groups
- managing change.

*The Reflective Practice Guide* is an essential source of support, guidance and inspiration for all students on education, nursing, social work and counselling courses who want to think about practice at a deeper level, question approaches, challenge assumptions and gain greater self-awareness.

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# THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE GUIDE

An interdisciplinary approach  
to critical reflection

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First published 2016  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Bassot, Barbara.

The reflective practice guide : an interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection / Barbara Bassot.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Nursing. I. Title.

RT41.B293 2016

610.73-dc23

2015017531

ISBN: 978-1-138-78430-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-78431-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-76829-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Interstate

by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

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# PREFACE

For a number of years I have been privileged to teach a large number of students on programmes designed to prepare people for a role in the helping professions. My own professional area of career development and guidance is relatively small compared to others, such as nursing, teaching and social work. As a result, literature on reflective practice specifically related to my field was fairly sparse. In my early days of teaching I found that I had to look to a number of other academic disciplines and draw on their literature in order to ensure that my students were not hindered in the development of their knowledge and skills in this vital area. It became very clear to me that there was a wealth of rich material that we could learn from.

*The Reflective Practice Guide* is the culmination of many years of teaching. I wrote it in order to bring together a body of literature from a range of professions and have also included some work of my own. While books written for specific professions will always be very valuable, our knowledge will be limited if we never look outside of our own particular academic boundaries. I trust that this book will enrich your practice as you draw on the knowledge and experience of professionals and academics from a variety of disciplines, and that ultimately it will enable you to give your clients the support they need and deserve.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, friends and colleagues for their invaluable support whilst writing this book. In particular, I would like to thank Marc Bassot for his careful proof reading and Martin Bassot for his excellent work on the diagrams. I would also like to thank Mary Andall-Stanbury, Dawn Tickner, Jane Westergaard and Karen Williams for their advice on the case studies. Finally, I would like to thank all my current and former students, as without them I would not have been inspired to write this book.

Figure 6.3 is reproduced with kind permission from the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University.

# INTRODUCTION

The important role of reflective practice is well recognised in a wide range of professional areas, including education, health, management and social care. If you are a student on a professional undergraduate or postgraduate programme, you will no doubt be asked to undertake a module (or more) on reflective practice, where you will be expected to engage in the process of reflecting on your developing knowledge and skills. As research has developed in this area, many people have come to realise that reflecting on experience alone is not enough. To take a genuinely reflective approach you need to be able to think about your emerging practice at a deeper level, questioning your approach, engaging with your feelings, questioning your assumptions and gaining greater self awareness. This is commonly referred to as critically reflective practice.

There are many books written on the subject of reflective practice. Typically, books are written within a particular academic discipline, e.g. education (in particular teaching), health (in particular nursing), and social work. Your tutors will undoubtedly recommend books written by those in their own discipline, and you should certainly follow their recommendations. However, there is much to be learned when the boundaries of academic disciplines are crossed. A recent ESRC project, 'Critical Reflection in the Professions' examined how research can enable reflective practice to be taken further forward. One of the main aims of the project was to bring together academics from a number of different disciplines to discuss how critical reflection can be researched and taught more effectively, in particular across disciplines.

The aims of this book are twofold. First, it is the first book of its kind to take a specifically interdisciplinary approach, drawing on literature from a wide range of academic areas, including those mentioned above. Throughout the book, you will be introduced to a wide range of theories and models that can help you to engage in critical reflection on your studies and professional development. This will enable you to read outside your own particular academic discipline. For example, student teachers will be able to read extremely helpful approaches from nursing and vice versa; this will be new material for many. In addition, many professional practitioners now work in multi-professional contexts and an understanding of reflective practice from fields outside your own will also be very helpful.

Second, this is a practical book that will help you to engage in critical reflection. In each chapter there are a number of examples and case studies drawn from a range of professional contexts to illustrate how the models can be applied in a variety of settings as well as your own. In addition, there are reflective activities in each chapter to help you to apply the theories and models to your own professional development.

Throughout the book the term 'client' is used to refer to the people who you engage within your role as a professional practitioner. If this is not an appropriate term for your particular context, please feel free to use an alternative, such as patient or student.

The book has twelve chapters and takes you on a journey from reflective practice to critically reflective practice. Reflective practice encourages us to review our learning experiences in order to seek improvement - to make our work even better. Critically reflective practice asks us to engage with our emotional responses and to be prepared to challenge some of the assumptions we might be making about people and situations. Here, it is important to recognise that issues of power in professional relationships and within organisations are often at work.

Chapter 1 begins with definitions of what reflective practice is and examines the reasons why professionals need to reflect critically on their work and practice. It considers the three key areas of professional knowledge, skills and attitudes, followed by a discussion of the learning journey from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence. Brookfield's (1995) four theoretical foundations of reflective practice are examined, as are the importance and dangers of tacit knowledge and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). The chapter then explores critical reflection as a choice and the need for busy professionals to make time to reflect in order to reap the benefits of investing time in it.

The focus of Chapter 2 is on self-awareness: a key aspect of beginning to practice reflectively. Becoming more self aware is an ongoing process; and the helpful concept of the metaphorical mirror through which practice can be critically evaluated is introduced. The chapter then moves on to explore the vital question 'How do I learn best?' and draws on Honey and Mumford's (2000) work on learning styles. The strengths and allowable weaknesses of the styles are explored, in particular how to maximise strengths and minimise allowable weaknesses. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the use of SWOT/B (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats/Barriers) and SWAIN (Strengths, Weaknesses, Aspirations, Interests and Needs) analyses as tools for personal and professional development. This is followed by a discussion of theories of motivation and Transactional Analysis drivers.

Chapter 3 focuses on the role of writing in reflection; this often enables us to reflecting at a deeper level. However, writing reflectively presents many challenges and we often need help to know how to start. Some tools for reflective writing are presented, in particular the benefits of using a reflective diary or journal are explored.

The focus of Chapter 4 is on learning from experience and considers some seminal work; Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and Schön's (1983) reflection-on-action. It poses the question 'Is this enough?' and whether or not we always learn from experience. Two models that are easy to apply (the ERA model - Experience, Review, Action and Driscoll) are also explored. The concept of transformative learning is introduced and the chapter concludes with why we do not always learn from experience.

Chapter 5 asks us to consider which kinds of experiences we learn the most from - positive ones or negative ones - and presents two contrasting models of reflection. Many people advocate that we learn from critical incidents, sometimes called problematic experiences (Osterman and Kottkamp, 2004), whilst others argue that we need to focus on positive experiences (Ghaye, 2011).

By Chapter 6 we are at the half way point on our journey and begin to explore critical reflection in more depth. Here, we explore the area of engaging with emotions and feelings in professional practice and question whether or not professionals can be truly objective. The chapter highlights why personal feelings need to be processed and the perils of failing to do so. 'The Almond Effect' is introduced and the work of Gibbs (1998) and Boud, Keogh and Walker (1995) are highlighted.

Chapter 7 is all about bringing our assumptions to the surface so we can understand them and the ways in which they influence our professional practice. It considers what assumptions are, how they come about and how they can be questioned. The work of Brookfield (1995), Argyris' Ladder of Inference (1992) and Argyris and Schön's (1974) concept of double loop learning are considered as tools to help us to challenge our assumptions.

Most of the book before this point is about reflection as an individual activity. In Chapter 8 the focus is broadened to discuss the vital role of feedback in the learning process and learning from others in the context of professional development. Characteristics of good and poor feedback are explained and the role of critical friendship is highlighted. A model for effective supervision and the Johari Window as a feedback tool are explored.

Chapter 9 continues this theme with its emphasis on reflecting in groups, and includes useful strategies and exercises for the group context. It also considers how groups can be facilitated effectively.

Chapter 10 deals with a broad range of issues related to the management of change and the challenge of constant and often rapid change in professional practice. It highlights strategies for coping with change, whilst exploring some theoretical approaches from business and management (in particular the work of Lewin) that can help us understand change better and analyse our responses to it.

The focus of Chapter 11 is on critically reflective practice as a way of being. This involves being open to change, dealing with issues of vulnerability and taking a questioning approach to practice. The work of Johns is central to this chapter and a consideration of professional practice as artistry. The chapter also considers the possible benefits of 'mindfulness' strategies in helping professional practitioners to manage stress.

The book concludes with Chapter 12, which seeks to bring together many of the aspects of the book in an integrated model for reflection. It also considers Senge's concept of personal mastery and the importance of having a clear vision for our practice in order to generate the creative tension we need to keep moving forward. This emphasises the need to continue to learn throughout our professional lives.

I hope that this book will enable you to develop your knowledge and understanding of critically reflective practice and that it will help you in your personal and professional development as you seek to support others in your practice.

Barbara Bassot



# 1 What is reflective practice?

'Without reflection, we go blindly on our own way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.'

(Margaret J. Wheatley, 2002)

## Introduction

In this first chapter we will begin by examining some definitions of the term reflective practice and consider some of the reasons why professionals need to think critically about their work. We will examine the four theoretical foundations of critical reflection and explore the concepts of reflection-in-action and tacit knowledge. We will discuss issues of time management and the importance of making time to reflect. The chapter concludes with a focus on the many benefits of reflection.

## Definitions

If you were to look in a standard dictionary for a definition of the word 'reflection', you would find at least two groups of words. The first refers to mirror images and the second to the act of deep thinking. In many respects this gives us very helpful clues in relation to what reflective practice is and what it involves. It can be likened to looking into a mirror to see our practice and ourselves more clearly and so give some serious thought or consideration to what we see.

So what is reflective practice? Lucas (1991) offers a useful definition when he argues that it involves a systematic enquiry to improve and deepen our understanding of practice. The use of the word systematic here implies far more than thinking about things, for example, whilst you are driving home. It suggests that it needs to be done in an organised way and to be undertaken in depth, in order to gain the maximum benefit from it.

Many people have their own ideas of what reflective practice is and how they would define it. For example, I have heard people say things like 'I know what reflective practice is. I reflect every day as I am driving home from work'. Of course, it is not for me to comment on the quality of someone's driving, but suffice it to say that deep reflection is not likely to happen while you are behind the wheel of a car! It is helpful to think about what reflection is not as

## 2 *What is reflective practice?*

well as what it is, and Thompson and Thompson (2008) offer some useful pointers in relation to this. For example, it is not just pausing for thought from time to time, or something just for students who can then forget about it when they start work. It is not something that you only do alone, as reflecting with others can be very helpful too (see Chapter 9). It is not a replacement for theory, but involves drawing on theory to enhance your understanding of practice; reflection, then, is a key means of applying theory to professional practice. Thompson and Thompson are clear to point out that all practice involves the application of theory and that we all need to beware of 'the fallacy of theoryless practice' (Thompson, 2000: 32).

### **Why professionals need to reflect critically**

The definitions above show that the reflective process is a complex one. When reading published literature, certain key terms are not always defined clearly; indeed, the terms reflection, reflexivity and reflectivity are sometimes used interchangeably, which can be confusing. The aim of this book is to take you on a journey from reflective practice (which focuses on learning from experience in order to improve practice), to critically reflective practice with its focus on paying attention to your emotional responses and being prepared to challenge your assumptions and the things you take for granted in everyday working life. This involves examining our personal values and issues of power in the context of working relationships, which leads to a careful consideration of reflexivity.

Critical reflection is vital in professional practice for the following reasons.

#### ***Providing a space for deep thinking***

If you are an emerging professional you are entering a world where the pace of life is fast and you can feel significant pressure to make decisions quickly. At times you may feel that time spent thinking something through is a luxury that you cannot afford, as distinct from time invested. However, taking time to analyse situations (what happened and why) can prevent mistakes occurring in the future and can help to build your confidence as you feel more secure in your ideas about your practice.

#### ***Evaluating and developing practice***

Being a professional involves the need for you to review your practice in an ongoing way in order to keep your knowledge up to date and to continue to develop your professional skills. Professional practice is constantly changing and never static. Thankfully this means it is never boring!

#### **Preventing stagnation**

As you gain experience it is important to ensure that your practice does not stagnate, but remains vibrant and focused on the needs of the client. In a relatively short space of time it is easy to 'get stuck in a rut', doing things in a particular way because you have always done them that way. Johns (2004: 5) sums this up very well when he states that reflective practice is 'the antidote to complacency, habit and blindness'.