

Reflection and ePortfolios

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Introduction

QMUC's ePortfolio can help you structure your thinking around a work based event and so enable your reflection. This area will provide key trigger questions to help you with each stage of your reflection - starting with a salient description, through to evaluation and ending with action. The questions are intended only to be an aide memoir rather than a fixed line of inquiry, so feel free to add your own questions at any time during each stage, as you think fits the scenario. You are the expert here and so you are in the driving seat. Answer what you think is helpful and don't be scared to face up to the difficult questions.

To make sure that 'you are doing it right', there are essential things to watch out for. For example, surprises, changes in perspectives and challenges in personal assumptions. Because reflection is a mirror image of what you think occurred the emerging account should demonstrate a variety of perspectives, meanings and interpretations that lurk beneath this social situation. As a reflective practitioner you should be valuing the relative uncertainty of knowledge which is buried in the situation. This is a journey, and as such, reflection demands open mindedness so that you are aware of the contextual and social basis of your practices. Appreciating that there is no one right answer means that you are deriving wisdom from your practice.

A wise practitioner is someone who can see alternative points of view.

In other words, there is no one right answer

So a word of caution if you are using reflection to try and justify one interpretation of an event, as this leads to a fixed account of your practice. Don't try and rush to assumptions about your own actions or worse, someone else's! Reflection is a process and as such takes time and a commitment to critically engage with the thinking process.

Something else before we start ... timing. It is best if your emotions aren't driving the reflection, as this can act as a barrier to new ways of thinking about an event. Emotions are important, and let's face it, are the reason why a situation sticks out in your mind. However you need a cooling off period because if you are still elated, angry, frustrated or hurt this will blind your ability to think logically, objectively and rationally with negative consequences for challenging personal perspectives.

Before you begin the essential stages of this process, it is important that you have 'dumped' some of the details of the event in your blog. This will help your story to emerge clearly, and help clarify the underlying issues which impinge your thinking and actions. Refer to the content within your blog and draw on this as you see fit.

Now let's start.

A salient description of the event

From your blog, write a brief account of what it was about the incident that:

- sticks in your mind
- causes you grief
- what you may be avoiding
- provides food for thought

Then ask yourself:

- What were the critical moments in this event and what was I thinking and feeling at the time?

Connecting up with the event

You are key to what happened and have influenced the way things went. This part of the thinking will help you stand back and see yourself as a key player.

- What were you thinking and feeling at the time?
- What was driving these thoughts and feelings?
- Did these emotions have any significance for subsequent actions?
- Was the event going the way you wanted it to?
- What particularly sticks out as a positive or negative moment with respect to your own actions?

Evaluating the event

When we 'experience' something, we put a value on it as good / bad.

- What was your evaluation of this immediately after the event?

At this immediate stage, your feelings were driving your judgements and conclusions about the event. There will be a 'fixed' account of what you think happened as your memory will be selective. There will be things that you may have forgotten about and now that you have given this some distance you can consider this more objectively:

- Would someone else have come to the same conclusion? ?
- Are you right to come to these conclusions and what is your evidence to justify these assumptions?
- What is the learning at this point?
- Can you name the issue which is lurking within this event – for example, team work, collaboration, partnership, inclusion, power imbalances, assertiveness, communication etc etc etc.

Giving something a name helps to frame the issue and you can begin to own it.

This will help with the next stage.

Theorising your practice

If you have been able to stand back and see the whole picture and yourself as a key player within this, you are ready to start the analysis. This is where it is important to engage with the challenge of reflection so that you can confirm what actually happened, rather than assume what happened. At the end of this stage you will have your 'informal' or personal theory about what happened. This will be tested out in subsequent situations and will move you from reflecting 'in' action to reflecting 'on' action. This is what the books call 'praxis' and is the mark of an expert practitioner.

The evaluation phase will have enabled you to consider the positives and negatives of the situation, from a more objective stance. If you haven't done so already summarise the situation by:

- compiling a list of the good things and the bad things that happened.
- identifying the core attributes of the situation – in other words, the things that had to be present for the issue to exist (the key players, attitudes present, time of day, contextual pressures etc)
- if appropriate, chat to someone else about this to deliberately seek alternative opinions.

Doing all this will evidence the 'thing' you are looking at.

Now its time to get better informed about this 'thing'.

Ask yourself:

- What do I know about this already
- Who can I ask to get better informed
- What do I need to know about this to make sure I can recognise it again when it happens
- If I had known about this 'thing' in more depth at the time, would my actions (or feelings or interpretations) have been different?

In other words,

- How did I contribute to its existence?
- Have I been here before?

What you are doing here is blending informal theory with formal theory so you are increasing your knowledge about the situation, and the 'thing' that was buried in the situation. This stage makes hidden (tacit) knowledge about the situation transparent, and can help to alter your thinking about the event itself. You may have a new understanding about what happened. The outcome is dependent on the strength of the evidence you can provide. Use new understandings to test initial assumptions by deliberately seeking out alternative perspectives. Others you trust can be great at this stage to help you think this through. Take your time and don't rush it. This bit is crucial.

Moving to action

You're nearly there. Well done and keep going!

- What is your conclusion now about what you think happened?
- What is the significance of this for future practices?

The answers to these two questions will help you think about how to action your learning – you are now in the planning phase of reflection

Implementing change

- So now you know what you want to do, how will you do this?

Remember you will need to test your conclusions about your learning to assess its validity. You are now researching your practice by deliberately manipulating the variables of a situation and monitoring the outcome. Yes, this is experimenting with your practice and something which is recognised as 'level 4 research' (Rolfe, G., 1996 Closing the theory practice gap; a new paradigm for nursing Butterworth & Heinemann)

So, watch for situations that have the same critical elements. Be prepared and attend to the social and contextual nuances of practice situations. You may be able to contrive situations, or they may come at you from out of the blue. In so doing, you are 'attending' to your practice and your mind is prepared and receptive to salient situations and events.

You may require additional resources to enable implementation of your learning so this is the final set of questions to ensure positive outcomes:

- What do you need to help you implement this action? (more learning theory/ identifying key people / clinical supervision / access to resources)
- Who would be key in supporting this development?
- What are the critical incidents required to implement this action?
- How can you evidence a change in outcome?

As with any research activity, there is a responsibility to share with others what you know. The onus is now on you to disseminate the outcomes of this practice knowledge to others, so that opportunities for pooling practice expertise continues. Go back to your blog and tell your story to others!

Good luck!