Reflective Practice: A Way of Learning for Community Development Practitioners

discussion paper prepared for
United Way of Calgary & The City of Calgary Community & Neighbourhood Services

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INTRODUCTION

The United Way of Calgary (United Way) and The City of Calgary Community & Neighbourhood Services support citizen-led community development within their Neighbourhood Strategies. Community development is a complex and ever-evolving strategy that requires ongoing learning and reflection.

This discussion paper is a summary of our findings and observations; it is our hope that it is useful to you as you integrate reflective practice into your work.

This is the 4th article in the series, and focuses on reflective practice: what it is, why it is important & how you do it?

What this document is about

Reflective practice is active and experiential; the best way to learn about reflective practice is by doing it! Starting with a literature review, a small group of community development practitioners from United Way and The City of Calgary participated in a pilot project.

This discussion paper is a summary of our findings and observations, and it is our hope that it is useful to you as you integrate reflective practice into your practice:

- shares insights from the literature review
- highlights learnings from our pilot project
- provides recommendations on how to implement reflective practice at United Way & The City

What we learned

Reflection is a process of reviewing an experience to describe, analyze, evaluate and inform learning. Reflective practice refers to a process of continuous learning in the workplace.

Reflective practice

- has the potential to enhance professional & personal growth
- can enhance community practice
- is integral to understanding & managing community development as an overall process
- sharpens our capacity to view community change as it unfolds: helps us to see both the whole & parts, simultaneously
- makes our efforts in the community more responsive because it allows us to challenge established ways of thinking and practicing

Reflection is a process of reviewing an experience to describe, analyze, evaluate and inform learning.
2. Case Study: Reflective Practice

Pilot project by local agencies

United Way & The City of Calgary Community & Neighbourhood Services were curious about how reflective practice could support their community development approach in neighbourhoods.

Recognizing reflection as a promising practice for community development, a pilot project was undertaken and tested by a small group of practitioners from each agency.

In this section
- questions & goals
- approach
- participant profiles
- pilot project process
- what we learned

2.1 Pilot Questions & Goals

Key questions
- What is reflective practice?
- How do you do it?
- What are our recommendations for moving reflective practice forward in our work?

Immediate goals
- increase the group’s understanding of, and comfort with, reflective practice
- add reflective practice to participants’ day-to-day practice

Intermediate goals were beyond the scope and timeframe of this pilot; however, we included recommendations about how to integrate a reflective practice approach into existing teams at both United Way and The City. Examples of intermediate & long-term outcomes might include:

- building reflective practice into practitioners work with residents to support the communities’ work of organizing, mobilizing & sustaining community action
- building reflection into organizational environments to support a culture of innovation & learning
2.2 **Approach**

We used a participatory action process. Through collaborative *learning by doing*, we actively co-learned and co-constructed how to reflect in a group setting.

As we practiced reflection, we also reflected on our reflective efforts. We used an iterative process to plan - that is, the results of one session were used as the starting point for the next session. Through reflective dialogue and a literature review, we collected, analyzed and synthesized information that simultaneously informed our pilot.

2.2.1 **Literature Review**

Throughout the pilot, we researched academic and practice literature from various disciplines and settings to better understand the process of reflection. Much of the literature was theoretical but nonetheless helped to design our framework.

The literature focused primarily on student reflection in academic settings, mainly through self-reflection (journaling) and the mentor-mentee relationship (teacher/student). There was little literature on the practicing professional, not much on guided group reflection, and even less on reflection in community settings.

Bailey and Graham’s one-year study with eight nurses used guided group reflection, and informed our pilot project. This study centered on discovering the best way to organize and facilitate guided group reflection. The rationale for guided group reflection came from the work of Johns, who values the support that guidance can bring to reflective practice. Eight sessions were conducted using two reflective models:

- sessions 1 – 4: Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle
- sessions 4 – 8: Johns’ Model of Structured Reflection

**Study outcomes that informed our pilot program**

1. participants gained a greater understanding of the process of reflective practice, though not all experienced the same degree of understanding
2. all participants experienced personal & professional development
3. most stated that the group practice allowed them to experience a deeper level of learning
4. the group, as a whole, was able to describe how they would use reflective practice as they moved forward in their practice

For more information on this study please see:
2.2.2 Value of Guided Group Process

A guided group process was used to learn about, and practice, reflection. This method was chosen because the literature indicated that with the right support and challenge, group reflection holds the promise of helping practitioners reflect more deeply, accelerating their learning.

When reflecting individually, it is easy for us to not challenge our assumptions, feelings and ways of knowing our practice; in a safe and supportive group setting, however, there is more likelihood of identifying challenges and giving meaning to our shared experiences. In a group, we realize we are not alone; we share similar challenges and, together, we can explore options for practicing more effectively in our community work.

In a group setting, guided reflection has the potential to:
- open up dialogue
- expand perspectives
- build a shared language to express our practice to each other
- move learning into practice

2.3 About the Participants

The pilot launched with an invite to frontline practitioners from both United Way & The City to ‘try on’ a collective reflective practice experience. Unfortunately, this initial invite, with a request for a brief letter of intent, did not yield much interest.

True to community development, we reached out to participants. This personal engagement strategy resulted in 10 participants coming forward:
- 2 Community Coordinators: United Way
- 8 Community Social Workers (CSWs): The City of Calgary Community & Neighbourhood Services (CNS)

Not all participants worked with each other, however all were involved in similar neighbourhood work. One participant took on the role of pilot coordinator to assist and advise the consultant in planning and communicating with participants.

The consultant’s role was to bring literature forward, guide the participants and write the discussion paper. There was a separate oversight advisory committee with representatives from each organization.

What participants told us about themselves

All participants currently practice reflection in some way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>education</th>
<th># of years practicing overall</th>
<th># years in current work role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 MSW</td>
<td>range: 1 - 26</td>
<td>range: 1 - 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 BSW</td>
<td>median: 12.0</td>
<td>median: 6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 BSW student</td>
<td>average: 13.5</td>
<td>average: 4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 not stated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4 About the Pilot Process

2.4.1 Sessions

Our group met six times over a four-month period, for two hours each time. Although there was a similar agenda for each session (check-in, reflection work, check-out), the sessions built on one another – an iterative process. As one participant noted “we are learning not only how to reflect ourselves, we are reflecting on the reflective practice process itself.”

Session 1
- reviewed the pilot objectives
- introductions: shared how long we had practiced & where we were working
- shared what we hoped to gain from the pilot: our personal objectives

Session 2
- completed a baseline survey on level of knowledge/use of reflective practice
- developed ground rules
- briefly reviewed the concept of reflection
- participants shared a practice example of engaging with the hard to reach population

Session 3
- introduced the basic skills of reflection & self reflection through journaling
- discussed nuanced ways to reflect: see Johns’ Layers of Reflection

Session 4
- used our customized Reflective Question Template to go through a complete example of the What, So What, Now What of reflective practice
- one group member shared her written reflective journal on a critical experience while the others listened & asked questions to take the reflection deeper

Session 5
- because the reflective process used in Session 4 was popular & worked well, we repeated the same reflective process with another group member

Session 6
- completed a post-pilot survey
- reflected on their overall experience with particular attention to what they learned: What, So What?
- how to move forward with reflective practice in their work & work environments; provide recommendations for this report: Now What?
2.4.2 Self-reflection

Participants were interested in learning more about self-reflection. The reflective writing strategy employed was writing from a structured model. Several participants volunteered to share their journal entries as part of our guided group practice sessions so we could all learn about reflective practice from their experiences.

We found that self-reflection through writing is not for everyone and is not as easy as it appears. However, we did find that writing our experience helped us to articulate the experience itself, using questions as guides. Then, through the guided group process, we could further develop the learning that occurred, expand perspectives of a situation and examine different actions.

2.4.3 Reflective Models & Questions

A model is simply a guide that helps with exploration. Although there is not a standardized approach to reflection or one right way to reflect, using a reflective model helped us frame the reflection experience for the pilot.

There are many excellent reflective models and questions identified in the literature. We drew primarily from Kolb, Gibbs, Borton, Driscoll and Johns; from these resources, we developed our guided group reflection process.

About the questions

- a springboard for dialogue
- allowed structured & creative reflection that suited the various learning styles of the participants
- guided us to explore our practice more deeply
- we did not answer all the questions: we used them as cues
- the process was fluid
- provided prompts or cues to deconstruct & reconstruct experience
- helped us understand what we brought into practice
- helped analyze experiences from many angles & make sense of what happened

We gave ourselves creative license to develop a way to reflect that suited our group needs. While working with these reflective questions, we found a model from the University of Minnesota (2011) that mirrored our understanding and use of reflection. This model overlaid the learning cycle of Kolb/Gibbs on the What, So What, Now What framework. We adapted this model and developed our own draft model.

See our customized Reflective Model & Questions


Group reflection holds the promise of helping practitioners reflect more deeply, accelerating their learning.
2.4.4 Guided Group Reflection

Guided group reflection is a process of guided dialogue and discovery using these exploratory questions to uncover information about our practice. It involves a back-and-forth dialogue on specific practice experiences that examines assumptions and feelings and searches for meaning to inform practice. This is done through attentive listening, summarizing, and synthesizing information.

In our case, the models and questions informed our guided group reflection process. In our guided group process, leadership was shared despite the presence of a facilitator. The process was democratic and participatory – participants took an active role in asking questions, providing feedback and sharing practice experiences. There was a high degree of mutual respect, support and trust that allowed for a deeper level of reflection.

2.5 What We Learned

2.5.1 Findings

This survey compares responses from participants about their knowledge level and the helpfulness of reflective practice, at the start and end of the pilot. The post survey includes the added dimensions of comfort and use of reflective practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Start of pilot</th>
<th>4 months later</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much do you know about reflective practice?</td>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much do you now know/understand about reflective practice (compared to prior to the pilot)?</td>
<td>Above average</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not answered</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you more comfortable with reflection now (compared to prior to the pilot)?</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>100% yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you added reflective practice into your own day-to-day practice, as a result of this pilot?</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>77% yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11% no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11% no answer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How helpful do you find your reflection in enhancing your practice?</td>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not helpful</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How helpful do you find your reflection in enhancing your practice after participating in the pilot?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Time 1 = start of pilot; n=10  Time 2 = end of pilot; n=9*
2.5.2 What Participants Said They Learned

The following includes themed responses from pilot participants.

What we learned

- Reflection was different than anticipated for example, we thought it would be a critical analysis of work by others but it is really self analysis through a framework of questions

- Reflection & debriefing are different reflection is deeper & more rewarding than debriefing: debriefing only allows me to state the situation & not dive into how it impacted me

- Reflection is a tool for professional development & can happen anytime not just after an event

- Reflection benefits practice
  - it is an important part of daily practice of community workers
  - provides time to stop & process how we are doing in our job
  - provides a better understanding & clarity of issues
  - opens up possibilities
  - allows us to truly evaluate & analyze our work

- Reflecting works better when it is done with someone else
  - sharing & learning with others was well received
  - helps with isolation when working alone
  - we learned we can help by just by listening to their story, getting them to discuss the thoughts & assumptions they bring to the story

- Reflection requires time, intentional effort, commitment, openness, listening & a high degree of trust non-judgmental, confidential, learning-focused environment

- Reflective tools provide a process or method of reflection using tools like the What, So What, Now What model help to dig deeper into the analysis of the issue/situation

- Reflection helps with self-awareness the understanding of, and comfort with, self-awareness: clarifying values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions

- Reflecting with a diverse group is enriching knowledge, experience & different perspectives of all group members is valuable

Reflective practice sharpens our capacity to view community change as it unfolds.


2.5.3  What Worked Well

The following includes themed responses from pilot participants.

What we learned

- **Group diversity** the synergy of different experience, knowledge, perspectives, and common values
- **Variety of staff** from different organizations & different offices
- **Group size** 8 – 10 is ideal
- **Shared, common experiences** with frontline staff: managerial level not present
- **Continuity** a closed group allowed for increased continuity
- **Voluntary** nature of the group & group readiness
- **Time** set a meeting time limit, choose the date for the next session before leaving, consistent location
- **Facilitator** facilitators set a positive tone, pace; create a safe space, positive energy & enthusiasm
- **Blend of theory/content & practice** learning & teaching at the same time, with handouts & literature reviews were a very good addition to move us forward
- **Tools & framework** helped guide reflection
- **Preparedness** coming prepared helped move the sessions forward
- **Rules** ground rules, check-ins & check-outs
- **High trust** trusting relationships, acceptance & no judgment

Reflection requires
time, intentional
effort, commitment,
openness, listening &
a high degree of trust.

2.5.4  What Could Be Improved?

The following includes themed responses from pilot participants.

What needs improvement

- **The process itself**
mix the way reflection occurs: for example, sometimes focus on one persons’ experience, others times have a common topics to reflect on; balance the positive & difficult community experiences
- **Scheduling the meeting times**
take time upfront to do scheduling; keep it regular; have a discussion on how often – feedback on this varied (every 2 weeks or once/month)
- **Not enough time to put reflection into action**
need to come back & provide feedback to the group on how things went
- **Identifying learning styles & format for group**
identify different learning styles at the beginning & explore group format options to match
2.5.5 Recommendations

The following includes themed responses from pilot participants.

Recommendations for moving forward

- Reflective practice needs to be embedded in our work & part of ongoing professional development
- Ensure colleagues & managers understand
  - the theory & research behind reflective practice
  - how it enhances community development work
  - necessary part of professional development
- Host a workshop to provide others with information from this pilot: theory, practice & then determine interest
- Options for reflective groups
  - mixed participants from different offices, agencies & experience groups
  - groups that come together based on their own interests & commonalities
  - bring in agencies that work in neighbourhoods or within area offices
- Time, support & respect for reflective practice is critical
- Facilitation of some form is required
  - have a facilitator initially; build group members facilitation skills & capacity to facilitate; have participants facilitate
  - consider rotating facilitation, co-facilitation
  - facilitate reflective learning in our community work

Summary

Overall, through our reflective pilot, we experienced several positive outcomes over a short period of time:

- we increased our understanding of, and comfort with, reflective practice; the majority of participants integrated reflection into their day-to-day practice
- pilot participants were open, uncovered more choices for action, began to find their voice & shared common struggles and joys
- most impressive was the courage to ‘try on’ a new way of learning & sharing together

for more information on how this case study contributes to learning about reflective practice & how to integrate it into the work of community development practitioners:

5.0 Considerations & Recommendations

Our most impressive outcome was the participants courage to ‘try on’ a new way of learning & sharing together.
3. Reflection Overview

To help practitioners incorporate reflective practice into their work, this section provides a brief overview of what was found in the literature - the what, who, when, where and why of reflection and reflective practice.

Because much of the literature is situated in academic or theoretical contexts, this section is a broad summary of what we learned. We found very little that spoke directly to the experience of community development practitioners; therefore, while this section outlines some key concepts, our emphasis is on our own experiential learning from the reflective practice pilot.

3.1 What is Reflection & Reflective Practice?

Reflection is not a new concept. It originally emerged from the work of early philosophers such as Aristotle and the more modern discussions from the educationalist, Dewey, nearly one hundred years ago (Duffy, 2007). Since then there has been much written about reflection.

We quickly discovered, however, that the literature lacked clarity around the concept of reflection and there are many different definitions. This lack of clarity presents challenges. It renders the concept of reflection at risk of becoming another ‘catch phrase’ that people use in an unreflective manner (Kinsella, 2009).

It was difficult to find a common definition. Authors describe reflection based on their philosophical and theoretical orientations. There were also many terms used for reflection: reflection, critical reflection, critical thinking, reflectivity, reflective learning and reflective practice.

For this discussion paper, we decided to keep our understanding of reflection simple. We describe reflection instead of attempting to find a common definition and use the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective practice’.

3.1.1 Reflection

Reflection, in its simplest form, is when we give something “serious and careful thought” (Duffy, 2007, p. 1401). This implies that reflection is not a passive activity but an active thought process. It is helpful to describe reflection as a verb:

reflection is “to think carefully, especially about possibilities and options”

[Duffy, 2007, p. 1401]

Reflection involves:

- self-awareness, understanding the experience & applying/transferring the learning from one situation to another [Duffy, 2007]
- is not an end point but a continuous process [Johns, 2006]
The process of reflection:

- may lead us to change our perspective of a given situation or undertake different actions
- can help us to unpack our “habits of mind that ... impair our judgments and keep us trapped in our frame of reference
  [Mezirow as cited in McKinley & Ross, 2008, p. 10]
- questions our assumptions, beliefs and values
  [Mezirow as cited in McKinley & Ross, 2008, p. 10]
- does not always offer a solution but we learn to understand & clarify situations that would otherwise have remained an obstruction to our practice
  [Greater Manchester AHP/HCS Lifelong Learning Team]

3.1.2 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice, simply put, refers to what practitioners do when they engage in a process of continuous learning in their work. What is interesting to think about is that most practitioners often don’t think about what they do – it is automatic; we just do what we do because it is what we have always done.

Every day practice for which we often have no or limited explanation of why or how we do it, is defined as tacit knowledge (Kinsella, 2011). Conversely, explicit knowledge is knowledge that we can describe and explain. Moving from tacit to explicit knowledge involves an intentional process of self-awareness and critical thinking:

“Good practice lies in challenging the tacit, unconsidered assumptions of everyday life via more open...forms of communication.” [West, 2010]

Identifying tacit knowledge helps us to know what we bring into practice. By bringing forth what we know, we can keep what is useful and toss what may be out of date or not helpful. Reflective practice is, in essence, the process of becoming aware and taking action from this awareness.

3.2 Who, When & Where of Reflection?

We examined literature from nursing, education and social work. No one discipline owns reflection. The philosophical/theoretical underpinnings of the respective disciplines may alter reflection’s definition and process but there are not substantive differences. All engage in a cyclical process of understanding practice by critically thinking and learning from it to inform practice.

There is no right or wrong as to ‘when’ and ‘where’ you reflect. Reflection can happen at any time, in any place, and does not have to be restricted to after an event has occurred. Reflection does not have to be applied only to adverse events – just as much benefit when reflecting on positive outcomes. For instance, after a learning session or when you have an ah-ha moment. It can be done privately as part of self-reflection, with another person or in a group.

In reality, reflection is occurring at all times and should be an ongoing, iterative process that is inseparable from practice. Johns’ Layers of Reflection (2009) illuminate when and how reflection takes place; the practitioner goes along a continuum from doing reflection to reflection as a way of being.
3.3 Why is Reflection Important?

Why reflect at all? We briefly explore the benefits to practitioners in general and community development practice, in particular.

3.3.1 Benefits to Practitioners

As practitioners, it is vital for us to engage in consistent, meaningful reflection that takes us from scratching the surface to a deeper level. This critical thinking facilitates lifelong transformative learning.

Reflection has the potential to:

- bridge the theory/practice gap
- foster the application of knowledge
- permit the resolution of practice-related concerns through a deliberate process
- enhance results, self-esteem & self-awareness
- highlight poor practices
- emancipate & empower practitioners towards change

[McKinlay & Ross, 2008, p. 8]

Reflection helps us to:

- examine past events, mix them with new learning & then make changes that enhance our effectiveness
- unearth the story of us in narrative form: reinforces our interpretation of new facts & clarifies the meaning of the experiences for us
- examine our beliefs, values & assumptions as we look more carefully at situations
- improve professional practice & contributes to interpersonal effectiveness through self-review
- think & feel in the moment
- step back from an event & take a closer look at our role in it
- promote change: keeps us vital & effective in our work
- allow for moments of insight (“light-bulb moments”) to increase our self-awareness

[McKinlay & Ross, 2008]

Not paying attention to our behavior is not an option ... our behavior has major impact on those we work with; reflecting, adapting and changing is a necessity in practice.

[McKinlay & Ross, 2008, p. 8]
3.3.2 Benefits to Community Development Practice

Community development is an intentional approach helping community members to come together and achieve common goals that improve their collective economic, social, cultural and/or environmental situation. The City of Calgary (2011)

Community development practitioners play a key role in engaging community members to increase capacity to mobilize, devise, and carry out plans to address specific issues as identified by community. As external agents of change, practitioners are often drawn in as catalysts to help residents engage, organize and mobilize for change.

The role of an external agent in community change efforts is not always easy, clear or linear. There is no ‘magic bullet’, no one right way of proceeding. Community development practice has a layer of complexity that works in shades of gray. Practitioners balance multiple roles and allegiances in challenging contexts while supporting communities to move forward.

Reflection holds promise in helping practitioners take an active role in continuously challenging their thinking and practice in this nuanced work.

Reflective practice

"engages with the messiness, the unpredictability, the uncertainty of practice, focusing not on abstract theory but on the real experiences of practitioners and the skills they develop as they try to make sense of those experiences."

[Slatiel, 2010]

A reflective practitioner is

"a facilitator whose role is to help find an optimal course of action or solutions to problems in an uncertain world. There may be a range of solutions and courses of actions which may vary for context to context, time to time, and practitioner to practitioner."

[Jones & Joss, 1995, p.26]

Being a reflective practitioner offers a lens to view the complexity of our work. This lens grounds the practitioner in the reality of social change and its wider social, political and organizational contexts. This is the bedrock of practice. The reflective practitioner, then, is not separate from the reality in which they practice (Frost, 2010).

Community development and reflective practice go hand in hand – partners, allies in community change efforts. Reflective practice helps us to practice in real time, while staying adaptive to, and mindful of, the changing landscapes we find ourselves working in.

Reflection grants us the space to pause and critically analyze practice - to critically think and explore where things are at in our day-to-day work, what directions hold promise or what may need to be reconsidered.
Our work is

“Seldom routine and involves working with people, all of whom are unique, in situations which are complex, frequently messy and obscure, rarely easy to understand and almost never amenable to standardized or prescribed responses … learning through reflection … involves the capacity to draw back in order to reflect on what is happening almost as it happens, and enables learning to take place in a way that allow thought-less action to become thought-ful.”

[Yelloy & Henkel, 1995, p.8]

3.4 What are Characteristics of a Reflective Practitioner?

Wheatley (2002) is optimistic about people’s capacity and potential to quickly learn complex competencies and knowledge. She advocates for us to be engaged with one another – where everyone is the student and teacher, expert & apprentice – in a rich exchange of experiences and learning. This requires openness, insight, commitment, confidence, creativity, and curiosity. Wheatley argues that:

- there is an urgent need for new leaders and new ways of working and learning together
- people want to do the best they can in their work
- people are eager learners willing to try new approaches, methods & ideas that will work

**Individual characteristics that facilitate reflection**

- a belief that it is possible to change as a practitioner, as learning is continuous
- a willingness to examine & learn from what happens in practice, using reflection as a tool for close examination of our practice
- an openness to self-awareness examining current reality, not in isolation, but in relation to past knowledge and assumptions
- the ability to articulate & share elements of practice with others in an honest way
- taking an active, deliberate, flexible approach to learning from our practice
- allowing a transformative process to surface where we learn, develop and grow, personally & professionally
- accepting knowledge can come from within, as well as, outside practice: and, not being defensive about what other people notice about our practice
- being motivated & courageous: act on reflection & personally action what is learned

[Duffy, 2007]
4. The ‘How To’ of Reflective Practice

In this section, we explore what we learned from the literature – the ‘how to’ of reflection: the basic reflective practice skills, reflective writing, some reflective models & guided group reflection.

How to get started
- read some literature on reflection
- work on your basic reflective practice skills
- use a reflective model/framework to help you to reflect
- find someone to reflect with
- develop your reflective writing
- have the courage to change & challenge

[Bulman, 2008b]

4.1 Reflective Practice Skills

5 basic skills underlying reflective practice
- description
- self-awareness
- critical analysis
- evaluation
- synthesis

[Atkins and Schultz, 2008]

Since we were trying to ‘unpack’ reflection, deconstruction of the reflective skills made sense. It helps with understanding the essence of reflection - the ‘nuts and bolts’ and reflection as a way of learning. These skills provide a helpful guide to review values, challenge assumptions and consider broader social, political and professional issues.

Description is an examination of the practice events and includes those thoughts, actions and feelings that were present.

Description involves stating the characteristics of something without expressing judgments. This is important when we recollect the important events and features of our practice. It allows us to reconstruct the situation to review it. It relies upon observation and expression. The purpose of the description is to get as full a picture as possible of what happened. Cue questions are who, what, where, when, why and how?

Self-Awareness is a key skill for practitioners, as knowledge about ourselves and how we affect others is essential for developing relationships with colleagues, partners and residents.
Self-awareness is the foundation skill upon which reflective practice is built. All adult learners need to be self-aware and take responsibility for identifying, and responding to, our developmental needs.

To be self-aware is to be conscious of our character and competence - our beliefs, values, qualities, strengths and limitations. It is quite simply - knowing oneself. Reflection is about reviewing and evaluating your thoughts, theories, beliefs, values and assumptions. It can be seen in two domains:

- **inner self**: how you think & feel inside
- **outer self**: what others see

**Evaluation** is to give it a value.

When we evaluate something, we give it a value or measure it against some sort of standard. Evaluation is the ability to make judgments about the value of something or to make a comparison. It is described as *muddling through intelligently* or making a *comparative assessment*.

**Critical Analysis** is to break it down and assess its worth.

To analyze something is to break it down into its parts and ask questions about each part. It means looking deeper, trying to draw preliminary conclusions or judgments from our analysis. What are the strengths/weaknesses of the parts and of the whole?

**Synthesis** is helping us gain learning from the process of reflection.

To synthesize something is the process of building up separate elements into a connected or coherent whole. When linked with reflection, synthesis is the ability to integrate new knowledge with previous knowledge.

From this thinking we can often gain fresh insight, a change in behavior and/or a decision. Synthesis is about answering the question ‘so what’ and moving into the ‘now what’. Synthesis helps us towards an outcome from the process:

- clarify
- develop a new attitude/way of thinking
- resolve a problem
- change in behaviour
- make an informed choice or decision

**Limitations to this type of a skill-based reflective approach**

- reflective skills develop gradually, over time, through practice rather than learning in skill-based courses
- some people’s different learning styles may lend themselves well to this type of approach and others’ styles may not
- less experienced practitioners often benefit from this deconstructed approach as it helps them to understand the parts that contribute to the whole
- as practitioners evolve in their practice, this approach can become somewhat restrictive and counterproductive, potentially limiting creative practice

[Atkins and Schultz, 2008]
4.2 Reflective Writing

Self-reflection was a very common practice found throughout the literature. In fact, much of literature focused on reflective writing. More and more professions are adopting self-reflection as a requirement to practice where evidence of self-reflection must be demonstrated to acquire professional licensure. Self-reflection then becomes integral to continuous learning and professional development. It is also used in many academic curriculums to help students close the theory-practice gap. However, many who graduated some time ago may not have been exposed to self-reflection practices.

Self-reflection is personal – it is done in a way that is most useful for you. There is no right or wrong way – it is more about the process than the product. However, writing out experiences using questions helps to guide ‘unpacking’ the experience. Self-reflection through writing is not for everyone and is not as easy as it appears. Using guided group reflection (noted in Section 4.4) along with reflective writing has the potential to further surface learning, expand perspectives and examine alternative actions for the future.

### REFLECTIVE WRITING STRATEGIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical</th>
<th>Creative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• critical incident analysis</td>
<td>• writing an unsent letter or email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dialogical writing: conversation through Q &amp; A’s</td>
<td>• writing to another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• exploring a problem, specific aspects of the experience or alternative perspectives</td>
<td>• writing as the other person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creating an on-going record</td>
<td>• writing as a journalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• writing a word limited summary</td>
<td>• storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• using a structured model/framework</td>
<td>• poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• using learning outcomes as reflective cues</td>
<td>• creating a review in a particular style</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jasper, 2008

4.3 Reflective Models

Although there is not a standardized approach to reflection or one right way to reflect, using a reflective model can stimulate and frame the reflection experience (Boud, 2010). Johns (2005) warns that models can be thought prisons imposing a reality on the practitioner that forces a fit to the model rather than using the model as a creative opportunity; nonetheless, working with a model is helpful.

A model is simply a guide that helps with exploration, regardless how one chooses to reflect (self-reflection, reflection with another, and/or reflecting with a group). There are many excellent models in the literature. It does not matter which one you choose: what matters is going through the entire reflective process – don’t stop at describing the experience or getting marred in endless analysis; don’t jump to solutions. It is the movement through and doing the harder in between that provides richness.
These models and their questions provide prompts or cues to deconstruct and reconstruct experience, helping us to understand what we bring into practice and analyze experiences from many angles to make sense of what happened. Using questions as a springboard for dialogue allows for both structured and creative reflection that suit various learning styles. It is not necessary to answer all questions. It is a fluid undertaking not a step-by-step process (Johns, 2006).

Through our literature review, we came across one model developed specifically for community service learning (University of Minnesota, 2011). This model brings together the learning cycle described by Kolb/Gibbs and the What? So What? Now What? framework. We found this framework best spoke to our understanding of reflection, so we adapted it for this pilot.

4.4 Guided Group Reflection

Reflection has been criticized as being too individualistic a concept in workplace environments, which are now increasingly team and collaborative based (Broud, 2010). When reflecting individually, it is easy not to challenge our assumptions, feelings and ways of knowing our practice; in a safe and supportive group setting, however, there is more likelihood of identifying challenges and giving meaning to shared experiences.

Guided group reflection

- is a process of guided dialogue and discovery using exploratory questions to uncover information – often outside consciousness – about practice (Todd, 2005)
- involves a back-and-forth dialogue on specific practice experiences that examines assumptions and feelings and searches for meaning to inform practice (Fook, 2010)

Guided group reflection is done through

- attentive listening
- summarizing
- synthesizing information

Essential components of a guided approach

- the guide asks questions that the practitioner has the capacity to respond to
- the questions have an intentional focus & aim: discover and explore areas rather than close practice down
- questioning does NOT serve as an interrogation but is strength-based and builds on the practitioner’s competence while also working through any practice difficulties
- questions reflect genuine interest & curiosity about the practitioner’s experiences
- attention needs to be paid to what isn’t being discussed

[Johns, 2006, p.52].
Group work is not without its tensions - uncovering what is behind practice in a public arena is not always easy. It “opens up our own personal awareness about who we are and why we behave the way we do” (McKinlay & Ross, 2008, p. 9).

Some of these tensions result in participants staying with safe topics and not discussing the more difficult issues (Carter and Walker, 2008), often exacerbated by trust issues and lack of effective group skills.

With the right support, challenge and trust, group reflection has the potential to:

- open up dialogue & provide a language to express our practice to each other [Bulman, 2008a]
- accelerate learning [Johns, 2009]
- stimulate more ideas & new ways of thinking [Carter and Walker, 2008]

NOTE: Another way to reflect with others involves a one-on-one peer relationship. This was not used in the pilot but is worth considering as it provides the practitioner with an alternative (or additional) reflection option. The process for reflection is similar to guided group reflection, just between colleagues.

5. Considerations & Recommendations

This section highlights general and organizational considerations that impact reflection in the workplace; important to consider when moving forward with reflective practice in the workplace. For individual characteristics facilitate reflection in the workplace, see section 3.4.

5.1 Considerations

From the community development practitioners who participated in this pilot project, agree that reflection can deepen and strengthen their practice.

To be effective, the following conditions must be in place

- embedded & integrated in work; part of ongoing professional development
- understood by colleagues & managers, including the theoretical framework behind reflection & how it improves practice
- interest in, or understanding of, reflective practice & buy-in from practitioners is critical for successful implementation
- balancing group diversity with practitioners who share common experiences enhances learning from reflection
- time, support and respect for reflective practice is critical
- facilitation is essential: external or group-led
Key insights for promoting reflective learning in the workplace

The key insights that participants shared echo what we discovered in the literature. This is not an exhaustive list but some key areas to think about:

- **reflection is one approach to learning**: it can be part of a multi-pronged learning strategy to help professionals acquire competence [Chivers, 2010]
- **reflection requires time**: not valuing reflection or sanctioning time for reflection can be barriers [Duffy, 2007]
- **reflection needs to be voluntary, not coerced**: people need to choose for themselves to undertake reflection [Boud, 2010]
- **reflection should not be a form of control**: caution if used as an assessment tool (West, 2010) or surveillance method [Saltiel, 2010]

**reflection can have unintended consequences**

- inappropriate patterns, responses, and behaviors can be reinforced instead of improving them without a trained facilitator [Teekman, 2000]
- learning can be shallow and superficial if there is not close examination and understanding of oneself, others and the work [West, 2010]
- sharing practice can cause tension as it can shake confidence & identity [Johns, 2009]
- cause conflict without supportive environments and proper facilitation [Duffy, 2007]
- reflective practitioners can be seen as troublemakers within organizations (with reflective practice falling by the wayside) if reflection is not supported and valued in the workplace [Osterman, 1990]

**5 inter-related qualities of a learning organization**

Exploring the facets of a learning organization was beyond the scope of this pilot; however, these 5 qualities must be considered when moving reflective practice forward:

- **shared vision**: gives purpose and direction to practice and learning
- **team learning**: ensures a commitment to working & learning together in a culture that fosters mutual respect
- **mental models**: helps us to work with, and be willing to uncover, assumptions & thinking that influence how we see the world
- **systems thinking**: being able to see the whole pattern & the way systems and parts inter-relate with each other
- **personal mastery**: clarifying & deepening our personal vision to help us realize desirable practice through reflective practice [John, 2006]
Learning in the workplace requires the establishment of internal systems, values, processes and practices that maintain and enhance learning (Billet & Newton, 2010). If not, any intention of reflection in the workplace will not be realized.

**Features of workplace learning**

- an organizational, collective focus with shared interest & action
- multiple, connected stakeholders all needing to find & operate on common ground
- generative focus, rather than instrumental: generates possibilities, not just manages a project
- developmental, with a repertoire of approaches to meet challenges
- reflection as an open, unpredictable, dynamic process that does have cleared formulated solutions and so, cannot be controlled & managed as a routine process

[Zukas, Bradbury, Frost & Kilminster, 2010]

A learning practice within the workplace worth considering is **Communities of Practice** - people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared area as a way of capitalizing on knowledge through the creation of learning systems (Wenger, 2009). **Communities of Practice** were reviewed but not incorporated into this pilot.

For more information:
Etienne Wenger's website at [www.ewenger.com](http://www.ewenger.com)
Wenger's introductory article [www.wenger-trayner.com/Intro-to-CoPs](http://www.wenger-trayner.com/Intro-to-CoPs)

### 5.2 Recommendations

**Recommendations for moving forward with reflective practice in work settings at United Way (Neighbourhoods) and The City of Calgary Community & Neighbourhood Services.** These recommendations are a synthesis from both the literature review and pilot participants.

1. Reflection needs to be as viewed part of ongoing professional development and a core competency of community development practice. Reflective practice needs to be embedded into the ongoing community work of practitioners.

2. For practitioners to undertake reflection in the workplace, reflection needs to be:
   a. valued & respected in the workplace: recognized as a legitimate learning practice and as one of the ways of enhancing community development practice
   b. supported in the workplace through the provision of time & resources
   c. embedded within an organizational culture of learning to help reflection flourish

3. When introducing reflection into an organization, both practitioners and managers would benefit from information & dialogue on reflection:
   a. consider hosting an informal learning opportunity (ex. workshop) or series of informal learning opportunities (facilitated by pilot participants) to provide information from this pilot (theory & practice) and dialogue about what reflective practice could look like in their workplace
   b. determine interest & options for reflective practice
   c. develop formal ongoing opportunities for reflective practice
4. Reflecting with others (guided group reflection) is an optimal choice: group reflection holds the promise of helping practitioners reflect more deeply and accelerate their learning. However, reflection needs to be voluntary; for those not ready or interested in participating, consider the option of a one-on-one peer relationship with a trusted, experienced colleague.

5. Consider various flexible options or a mix of options for moving forward with group reflective practice. When looking at options for groups: reflective groups benefit from membership that has a diversity of knowledge, skills and experience; practitioners who undertake similar work; and, a learning focused goal – not as a surveillance/supervision method.

The types of reflective groups that could emerge depend on what makes sense for the work. Options for reflective groups could include:

a. groups from teams within the respective organizations
b. mixed groups from the different city area offices
c. mixed groups from different organizations
d. groups that come together based on their own interests & commonalities (the Martindale Team)
e. groups that include others (agencies, partners, supporters, residents) who work together in the community work; consider this over time as knowledge, comfort and competency with reflective practice is built

6. Facilitation is an important consideration for group reflection: initially, consider short-term facilitation support (from outside the group membership). However, build group members’ facilitation skills and capacity to facilitate and then have participants facilitate (ideas: rotating facilitation, co-facilitation). This will enhance group ownership and sustainability. Consider a reflective support mechanism for those who are the facilitators.

Thank you for reading our work-in-progress paper on Reflective Practice.

Did you find this paper useful in learning about Reflective Practice? How could we do better?

Your feedback makes a difference and will influence future projects.

Help us build our own reflective practice by providing your thoughts and suggestions today:

Bibliography


Greater Manchester AHP/HCS Life Long Learning Project Team (nd). Handouts: #1 An introduction to reflective practice; #2 Core skills of reflection; #3 Models of reflection; #4 Recording your reflections; #5 Exercises to support reflective practice.


Bibliography continued


Toolbox & Resources

This section includes:

- references we found particularly useful
- a customized Reflective Question Template we developed for the pilot
- a draft Reflective Model we developed for the pilot

Practical resources we found particularly useful if you have limited research time

Books

- McKinley. & Ross. (2008). *You And Others: Reflective Practice For Group Effectiveness In Human Services*

Article

  www.communityscience.com/images/file/What%20is%20Reflective%20Practice.pdf

Handouts

- An Introduction to Reflective Practice
- Core Skills of Reflection
- Models of Reflection
- Recording Your Reflections
- Exercises to Support Reflective Practice

  **To download:**
  Google > copy/paste into your search bar: Greater Manchester AHP/HCS Life Long Learning Project Team

Reflective models & questions from the literature that we referenced

We developed a customized Reflective Question Template & a draft Reflective Model from the following resources:

- Borton: Reflective Model (1970)
- Gibbs: Reflective Questions
- Johns: Layers of Reflection
- Johns: Pathway from Novice to Expert
- Johns: Reflective Questions
Reflective Practice: SAMPLE QUESTION TEMPLATE

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT?</th>
<th>SO WHAT?</th>
<th>WHAT NOW?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>EVALUATION</td>
<td>SYNTHESIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who, what, where, when, why, how</td>
<td>give it value</td>
<td>build on the previous phases &amp; consider alternative courses of action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHAT?**

What was the overall context of the event?
What was I trying to achieve?
What happened? Describe the experience. Think about: who, what, where, when, why, how of the experience & the result.
What role did I play in this & others play? What I bring to the table that is different than others?

**SO WHAT?**

How was the experience different from what I expected? What surprised me?
What did or didn’t go so well? Think about: strengths and limitations.

**WHAT NOW?**

What alternative courses of action/choices might I consider in a similar situation? Think about: what else I could have done?
Is there more I need to learn related to my CD work?
What are my learnings? Think about areas of learning: my own internal feelings, values, assumptions; outside constraints/factors; my own knowledge, experience, intuition; different/new knowledge, skills or interests; alternate way of thinking.
What has had the most impact on me? Think about: what I will take away from this? What has the most meaning for me?
How has this experience changed my understanding of CD practice? Think about: what I will take away from this? What knowledge I have gained for future CD practice?

**ACTION**

enhance our learning & choose next steps

What are the consequences of the experience on the community, colleagues & partners?
What do I need to follow up on? What do I need to do? Think about follow-up needed to address identified challenges or difficulties.
In future:
What would I stop doing/continue doing?
What will I do more of and/or less?
What will I do differently?

**SELF-AWARENESS**

knowledge about ourselves & how we affect others

What was I feeling/thinking when the experience started, and during?
How did other people make me feel?
How did others feel about the experience? How do I know this?
How do I feel about the outcome of the experience? What do I think about it now?
What beliefs/values, assumptions & knowledge did I bring into the experience? Think about: past experience, theory.

**ANALYSIS**

break down & give worth: look deeper at what was behind the experience

On what basis am I making these judgments? How do I know this?
What more might I need to know about to help me understand the experience?
What influenced what I did & what happened? Think about what I brought into the experience: my own internal feelings, values & assumptions; constraints outside myself – others, the context; my own knowledge, experience, intuition, other things.
Are there other ways to view the experience? Think about: alternate perspectives or possibilities not thought of yet. If others looked at the experience, how might they view it?

* CD: community development
Reflective Practice: MODEL

A Learning in Action Process

While working with the reflective questions, we found an existing model developed specifically for community service learning. This original model mirrored our understanding and use of reflection.

about this model

- the original model was developed by the University of Minnesota (2011) specifically for community service learning
- the original model overlaid the learning cycle of Kolb/Gibbs on the What, So What, Now What framework
- each phase is given an action heading & description
- we adapted the original model & added reflective skills to each phase [Atkins & Schults, 2008]

Experiencing:
activity phase
DESCRIPTION

Applying:
plan effective use of learning
LEARNING IN ACTION

Sharing:
exchange reactions + observations
SELF AWARENESS

Processing:
discussion patterns
EVALUATION & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

GENERALIZING:
develop real-world principles + understanding
SYNTHESIS

NOW WHAT?

SO WHAT?