



THE AIS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE GUIDE: A REFERENCE TOOL DESIGNED TO SUPPORT AND ENHANCE REFLECTIVE THINKING AND LEARNING

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Summary

This resource has been prepared to support the development of reflective thinking and practice, and provides a number of suggestions and examples to aid and enhance the learning process. However, the information is quite flexible and designed to assist with the construction of practices appropriate to the needs of individuals rather than being prescriptive.

Suggested use

The guide has been structured in a way that enables readers to navigate to the most relevant topic and it should be used as a reference tool to locate specific information within a particular section, rather than being read cover-to-cover.

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Disclaimer

Every attempt has been made to ensure that the information contained in this resource is technically accurate, ethically sound and morally correct. However, the author and other persons involved with the development of this guide cannot be held responsible and/or liable for any issues that might occur as a result of its use.

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Paul Perkins is an associate Professor at the University of Canberra and a member of the Australian Institute of Sport High Performance Coach Development Team. He is a dedicated, passionate and experienced coach, educator and researcher with an extensive background in the Australian sport sector and a passion for helping others and seeing people succeed. Paul is skilled at, and highly experienced in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating multi-layered sport-based development initiatives and has a thorough understanding of deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning and how these different processes can be used to draw conclusions, make predictions, and/or construct explanations. Whilst Paul's research has been multi-disciplinary and positioned within the broader societal context, he is currently exploring the benefits of more social and collaborative approaches to coach learning and is interested in contributing to long-term positive outcomes through the use of Australian First Nations methodologies.

What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice is the process of thinking about and reflecting on what you do. It is closely linked to the concept of experiential learning (i.e., learning from experience), in that you think about what happened, what you did, and what you would do differently next time. While there is considerable debate around what actually constitutes as reflection, most researchers agree that it helps to develop greater levels of self-awareness, creates opportunities for development and can be highly beneficial for a range of professions. Importantly and perhaps most significantly, nearly all experts agree that reflective practice is a skill which can be learned and refined through experience and the dynamic interactions of everyday living and work.

What does the process involve?

Reflective practice involves integrating activities into daily life on a routine basis, which in turn, can prompt periods of self-analysis, aid self-management and improve decision-making. Essentially, the process entails:

- > Listening to ourselves.
- > Being aware of our feelings.
- > Addressing our assumptions.
- > Noticing patterns in what we see.
- > Changing the way we see.

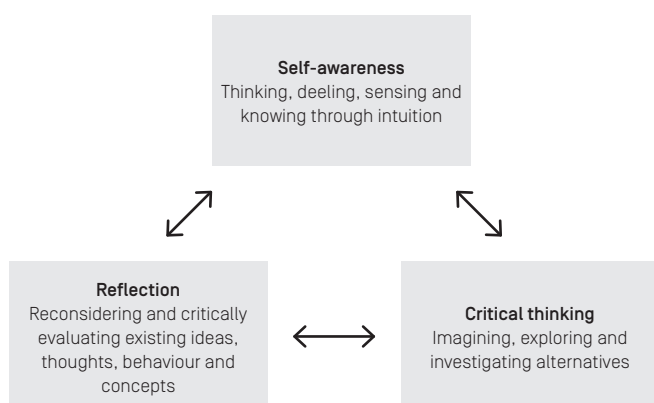


Figure 1: Summary of the key components of the reflective practice process.

What attributes are required to be a reflective practitioner?

A list of personal qualities considered essential for effective reflection is provided below. Individuals will need to consider these points when developing their own strategies, approaches and processes.

- > A willingness to learn from experiences.
- > A belief that it is possible for change to occur.
- > An ability to describe and analyse issues.
- > A belief that there is no end point to learning.
- > An ability to be open to other opinions.
- > An ability to act on reflection.

Benefits of reflective practice

Regular engagement in reflective practice has been shown to improve performance across a range of professions by providing a systematic and structured approach to learning that enables new ideas to be transformed into practical solutions. It provides opportunities for teams and individuals to reflect openly and honestly when things go wrong, and is often used as a tool to assess situations, decisions and behaviours. However, perhaps its greatest strength lies in the way it helps develop the habits, skills and mindsets required for personal growth and development. In summary, individuals who develop a regular habit of reflecting often improve such valuable skills as:

- > Emotional intelligence.
- > Decision-making.
- > Communication.
- > Problem solving.
- > Critical thinking.

Tips for becoming a reflective practitioner

While there is no set approach or formula for becoming a reflective practitioner, the following suggestions are intended to help get you started.

- > **Time:** Like all habits, little and often is generally the most effective way to implement a new routine or achieve a new goal. Remember, even a few minutes a day is much better than doing nothing at all.
- > **Focus:** Make a conscious effort to minimise distractions by finding a space where you are not likely to be interrupted. If you are in a loud and noisy environment consider using headphones to help block out the noise.
- > **Mindfulness:** Take time to get in the zone. Even if you can only devote a few minutes to your practice make sure you are present and clear of mind before you begin.
- > **Approach:** Reflecting is a highly personal process and there is no 'one right way' to do it. Therefore, practicing it, should be done without any judgement or self-criticism.
- > **Experiment:** Be experimental and try different approaches. For example, you could use the models in this resource to discover what works best for you and/or as a basis to develop your own unique style and approach.

Existing models and frameworks

As noted above, the following is intended to support and encourage the uptake of reflection but is by no means prescriptive. Instead, readers are encouraged to use the information to create highly personalised models based on their own particular needs.

Kolb's experiential learning model

One of the most popular models for explaining how new skills, knowledge and insights are acquired through experience is Kolb's four-stage experiential learning model. According to Kolb, new knowledge is generated when a learner successfully transitions through the four stages outlined below, and although learning can begin at any stage of the cycle, no single stage can be considered an effective learning experience on its own.

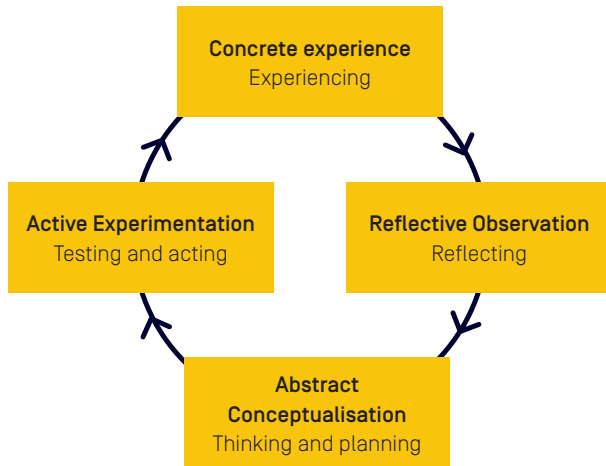


Figure 2: Schematic illustration of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, in which learning is grounded in reflection and continuously modified by new experiences.

An example of Kolb's experiential learning model

The following utilises existing coach learning literature to demonstrate how Kolb's four-stage experiential learning model could support the development of coaches.

- > **Stage 1:** A coach has a concrete experience of something new during a training session. This could be, for instance, the implementation of a novel activity as part of a new teaching method.
- > **Stage 2:** The concrete experience is followed by a period of reflection. Here, the coach considers what went well and identifies areas of possible improvement by developing an initial understanding of what aided the athletes' learning and what hindered it.
- > **Stage 3:** During this stage, the coach makes sense of what has happened by conceptualising links between what the athletes just did, what the coach thinks they already know and what she/he thinks is required for further improvement. To aid this process, the coach may use a range of strategies to clarify and explore ideas including, the reading of online articles, textbooks, research papers, discussions with other coaches, and conversations with athletes and sport scientists. The important thing here is that the coach modifies the initial ideas based on what has been learnt from the observations and wider research.
- > **Stage 4:** The coach now applies what has been learnt by taking the ideas from the reflective observation and conceptualisation stages and turning them into active experimentation. Cycles are then serially repeated and continuously modified by new experiences and the newly acquired knowledge.

Gibbs' reflective cycle

Understanding of what occurs during the reflective stage of Kolb's learning framework has been aided by Gibbs, who presented a six-stage model to assist with the examination and interpretation of experiences. As can be seen in the Figure below, the first three stages are concerned with what happened during an experience while the final three relate to processes used to develop strategies aimed at increasing the probability that more positive future outcomes will be accomplished.

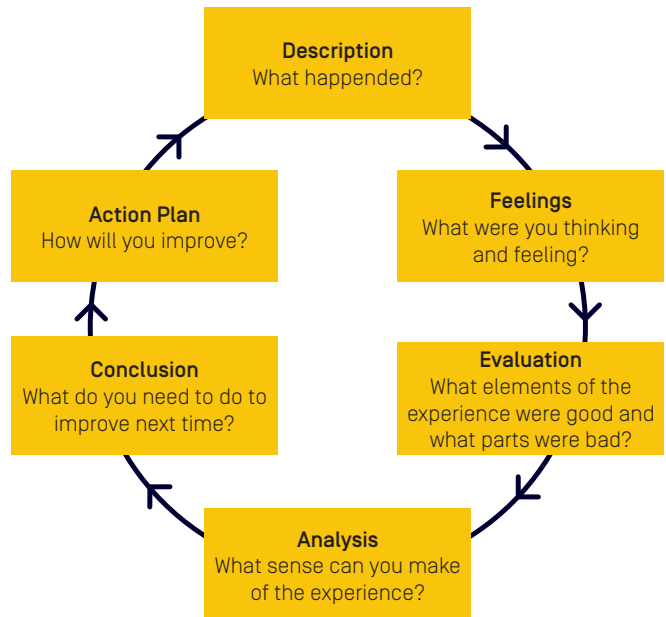


Figure 3: Overview of Gibbs' six stage Reflective Cycle outlining how this approach to learning could aid the development of coaches.

An example of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle in action

Gibbs maintains that capacity for reflective practice can be developed by having a learner consciously step through the six-step process in relation to a specific occurrence. A summary of how this might be done in a coach learning environment is provided below.

- > **Step 1. Description:** During the initial phase, a coach should aim to provide a clear and accurate account of an experience. At this stage, the descriptions do not need to be analytical, but the account should be factual and concise.
- > **Step 2. Feelings:** The coach should use this stage of the process to identify and record any thoughts and/or feelings they had during the experience, with these directly referenced to specific moments of the experience. It is vital that the coach is completely honest in this task since correct identification of thoughts and feelings is prerequisite to effective development of strategies in response to the experience.
- > **Step 3. Evaluation:** This phase provides an opportunity for the coach to consider what went well and what did not go as well as initially planned.

- > **Step 4. Analysis:** During this phase the coach may refer to relevant literature and/or seek the support of a More Knowledgeable Other to help make sense of the experience. For example, if a coach felt the instructions given were not clearly understood, they could consult educational research on effective communication to help develop salient skills.
- > **Step 5. Conclusion:** Based on the coach's research, all the different ideas are pulled together resulting in a clear understanding of what needs to be improved and the ways in which it can be done.
- > **Step 6. Action plan:** The coach creates a step-by-step detailed plan for provision of a new learning experience by utilising information arising from the previous five phases. Here the coach decides what will be kept, what requires changing and what can be done differently. The action plan can also include strategies aimed at gaining further insights. For example, observing another coach's training session, talking to more knowledgeable others and spending time with a mentor can all be effective ways to enhance coach development.

Schon's reflective practice theory

Similar to the above, Schon's reflection theory focuses on "learning by doing" and provides a suitable framework for people to examine what informs their practice and to determine how these factors might subsequently aid or hinder their future work (see for example Figure 4). The theory suggests that the learning incorporates the following two elements:

- > **Reflection-in-action:** In a coach development context, this refers to quick thinking and responses during a training session. For instance, a coach trying to explain something which the athletes do not initially understand may be able to reflect-in-action to quickly recognise the problem, understand why it is occurring, and promptly respond to it by reframing the explanation or approaching the topic from a different perspective.
- > By contrast, **reflection-on-action** would take place after the training session. Here the coach has the time and space to critically reflect on what occurred and can think much more deeply about the situation. Critically reflecting on his/her action not only allows the coach to develop a more refined understanding of what caused the initial problem but enables the development of solutions aimed at minimising the potential for recurrence. The quality of the solutions, however, depends on coach characteristics such as level of knowledge, degree of experience and understanding of relevant theories.

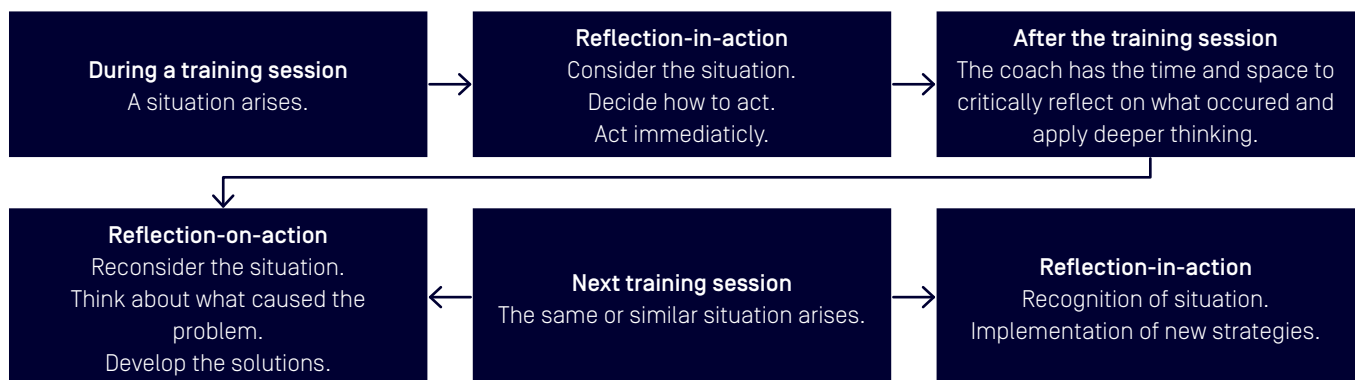


Figure 4: Schematic overview of the ways in which "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" can aid the development of coaches by getting them to think deeply about their current practices and identify factors that could subsequently aid or hinder their progress.

Moon's five stage learning model

In 1999, educational theorist, Jenny Moon presented a five stage model as a way of demonstrating what she believes is the best possible representation of learning. The Figure below is an adaptation of this work and highlights how an ability to engage in meaningful reflective practice generates the highest level of learning. Nevertheless, it should be noted that whilst exposure to progressively higher levels of activities will move learners up through the levels, the upgrading process requires a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of the learner and a willingness to be critically reflective.

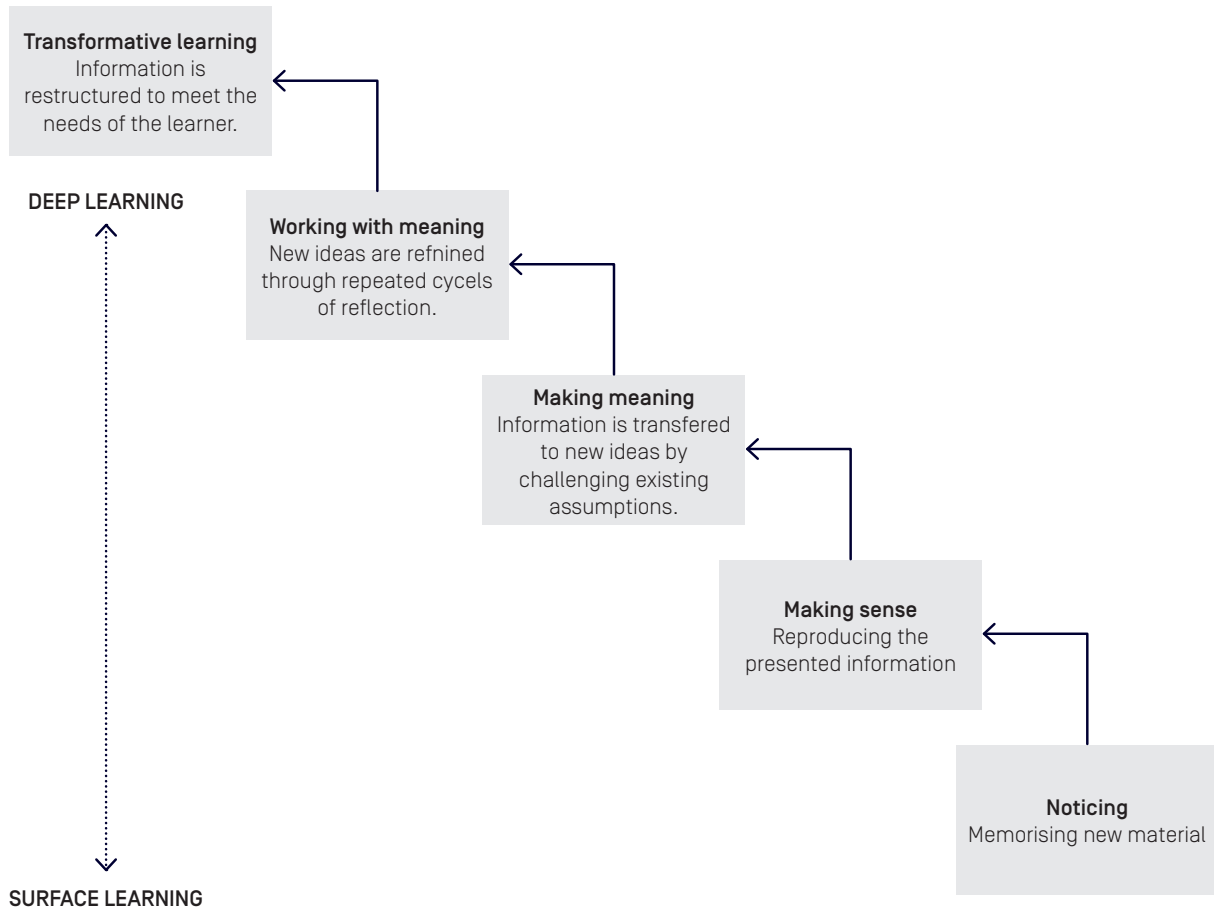


Figure 5: Visual representation of Moon's five stage learning model intended to show how "reflection lies somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking [because] we reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting" – Jenny Moon.

Methods aimed at supporting reflective practice

Writing is an integral part of the reflective process and while this can be done on a computer, sometimes the added physical dimension of moving a pen across paper can help create a more calmer and receptive brain state thereby supporting the overall effectiveness of the task. Regardless of the method, the important thing here is to capture your thoughts and feelings as soon as possible after an event while they are fresh in the memory and easy to recall, and to reflect on the situation both emotionally and intellectually so that a brief but detailed account of the experience is recorded. This point is particularly relevant when, for example, we believe we did everything we could during an experience to make it the best it possible could be and therefore believe that nothing needs to be changed. This too, however, is a highly important and equally valid outcome that needs to be documented, reviewed and subsequently analysed.

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

– Margaret J. Wheatley

Suggestions intended to support reflective writing

Depending on the discipline being studied or the purpose of the work, reflective writing can take many forms. For example, formal reflective essays and reports generally have clear structures and formats while less formal reflective writing, such as blogs or journals tend not to be organised in such distinct ways. The following, based on the

"3W model" is aimed at the latter and provides suggestions intended to support the development of current practices by providing a practical framework for the documenting and exploration of personal thoughts, feelings and experiences.

An example of the 3W model in action

A general outline of the 3W model is provided below. It should be noted, however, that in addition to this approach any of the earlier models or adaptations of them could be used for this task.

Step 1: What (description of event) *provide a descriptive account of the event*

- > What happened?
- > Who was involved?
- > What was my role?

Step 2: What's important? (interpretation of event) *reflect on, and interpret the event*

- > What is the most important/interesting/relevant/useful aspect of the event?
- > How can it be explained?
- > How is it similar/different to other experiences?

Step 3: What's next? (outcomes) *determine what can be learnt from the event*

- > What have I learned?
- > How can this be applied in the future?

Something to consider

Whilst the above iterative process only consist of three simple questions, it requires comprehensive reflective answers and an ability to analyse and learn from experiences.

Concluding thoughts

While this resource emphasises that reflective practice can play an important role in the development of new skills and knowledge, all the models outlined highlight the need for repeating cycles to ensure the continual progression of learning occurs. It is also clear that being informed by research and making sense of previous experiences are key factors for both professional and personal growth, and for ongoing learning and development. It is hoped that the models and information contained within this guide helps you to achieve these goals by supporting and encouraging the development of very personal and highly effective reflective practices.

"We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience"

– John Dewey

"Honest self-reflection opens your mind to reprogramming, change, success and freedom"

– Dr Steve Maraboli