

# Asking Additional Key Questions of Self-Reflection

## Introduction and background

This thought piece from Dr Simon Brownhill at Bristol University's School of Education follows on from and expands his earlier work (see summary 45, 2021-22). The springboard for the work was his personal frustration at the lack of support and resources available when attempting to actively engage in self-reflection as part of his continuing professional development. This piece considers key questions around definitions and types of self-reflection, about the process of self-reflection, and how self-reflective activity can be undertaken and encouraged in others. It provides a 'go-to'/short resource which can help individuals to self-reflect as part of their personal learning and professional development.

## Key points

### Reflection and self-reflection

- Reflection helps us to cope with the inevitability of change. It is also recognised as a key way of leading us towards growth and happiness. It also gives out brains the opportunity to pause, to untangle ideas and to process our observations and experiences.
- Individuals have many opportunities to engage in reflection including reflection toolkits, technological applications such as process displays and prompts, and social media platforms.
- There is, however, much less support for those wishing to engage in self-reflection. This is partly because there is some confusion about the distinction between reflection and self-reflection. The author draws here on the work of Jones and Lishman (2021, p. 2)<sup>1</sup> who suggest that "self-reflection may mean different things to different academic disciplines." He goes on to explain that self-reflection may also mean different things to different people.
- Both reflection and self-reflection focus on thinking, but the former is more focussed on thinking about external action with a view to improvement ((Hatton & Smith, 1995)<sup>2</sup>, whereas the latter is more a matter of internal thoughts, emotions, feelings, and motivations (Philipps, 2011)<sup>3</sup>.
- Reflection helps us to cope with the inevitability of change. It is also recognised as a key way of leading us towards growth and happiness. It also gives out brains the opportunity to pause, to untangle ideas and to process our observations and experiences.
- Definitions of self-reflection can extend beyond a focus on the past (the *lived* experience), to self-reflection which involves the present (the *living* experience), and that which involves the future (the *to-be-lived* experience). Self-reflection can pertain to the future since it can lead to new understandings which will, in turn, affect future actions.
- Other researchers have focussed on the potential of self-reflection to explore and develop our mindsets. Facilitation of this positive mindset/connection can be achieved by self-reflectors being selective of the *type* of self-reflection that they choose to embrace, this selection being influenced by working role and personal attitude.
- The additional types of self-reflection presented by the author are *teacher self-reflection*, *maladaptive self-reflection*, *active self-reflection*, *professional self-reflection*, and *adaptive self-reflection*. They are described below. Note that the full paper includes references to literature on which they are based.
- *Teacher self-reflection* is basically becoming aware of the teacher's "own acting" in a certain way, e.g., an educational situation, followed by asking questions about why the teacher chose to act the way they did, and consequently trying to find alternative solutions and suggestions for approaching the given situation.

### Additional definitions and types of self-reflection

- In this paper, the author presents additional types of self-reflection which complement those discussed in the earlier paper (Brownhill 2022a)<sup>4</sup>.
- Numerous definitions of self-reflection have been proposed by theorists, academics/researchers, and

<sup>1</sup> Jones, A., & Lishman, R. (2021, August 30 – September 3). *Self-reflection as an assessment: have we reflected on why we are doing it?* European Consortium for Political Research annual conference (online), Teaching and Learning sub-group.

<sup>2</sup> Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education: towards definition and implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(1), 33–49. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(94\)00012-U](https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(94)00012-U)

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, O. (2021, August 2). *How To Start Your Journey Of Self-Reflection? - By Optimist Performance*. Optimist Performance. <https://www.optimistperformance.com/captains-blog/news/how-to-start-your-journey-of-self-reflection-by-optimist-performance/>

<sup>4</sup> Brownhill, S. (2022a). Asking key questions of self-reflection. *Reflective Practice*, 23(1), 57–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2021.1976628>



- *Maladaptive self-reflection* involves more destructive ways of thinking that deplete energy resources by generating negative emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, and fear-based actions.
- *Active self-reflection* involves making a concerted effort to cultivate self-reflection as a skill through regular application and practice.”
- *Professional self-reflection* is a professional's ability to review their performance critically and constructively in order to improve and move forward.
- *Adaptive self-reflection* is an active practice aimed at understanding and evaluating one's emotions, cognitions, and actions.

### Key elements of optimal self-reflection

- The author puts forward the idea that there are three independent, interconnected skills or *elements* (referred to as the 'Triple Os') which facilitate optimal self-reflection. They can be thought of as the legs of a camera tripod.
- The first of these is openness, an ability to see things for what they are, not what we think they should be. It means becoming aware of our own biases and stereotypes about the world, other people, or even ourselves, and working to overcome them. Openness involves being flexible, and never judging people by their outward behaviour. It also involves acknowledging mistakes and taking responsibility for them.
- The second element is observation – the ability to watch yourself in the same way you watch external events –with both perspective and distance. Sometimes referred to as *meta-cognition*, this skill is especially helpful for using self-reflection as a way to overcome compulsive, addictive, or habitual behaviours. It can heighten an individual's ability of many things including anxieties and fear responses, irrational thoughts, and unhealed emotional wounds.
- The third element is objectivity- the ability to separate your thoughts, feelings and behaviours from your identity and sense of self. There are many ways of developing the skill of objectivity. These include writing a thought diary and writing the thoughts and the immediate triggers – one should also refer to the feelings which accompany the thoughts. Other suggestions are trying to stop cultivating biased ideas, accepting your feelings in a non-judgemental way, and reframing negative thoughts with positive self-talk.

### The process of self-reflection

- Researchers have proposed a variety of models for those wishing to engage in the 'how' of self-reflection. For example, Jernigan (2019)<sup>5</sup> proposes a simple 5-step model as follows. Be intentional (make self-reflection a priority). Schedule time with yourself and stick to it, choose a 'big question' to ponder (e.g., what do I want more/less of?) Document your key take away – this may be an action or approach which you wish to take. Repeat soon, i.e., schedule the next appointment with yourself.

<sup>5</sup> Jernigan, J. (2019, December 6). *5 Simple Steps for Self-Reflection*. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/5-simple-steps-self-reflection-janice-jernigan>

- The author outlines 8 forces' or tools which can be used to provide this support to teachers and learners engaging in self-reflection. They can be remembered through the acronym MOTELIER and are outlined below.
- **MODELING:** How do you intentionally model your own self-reflections so that your thought processes are shared and made visible to others?
- **OPPORTUNITIES:** How do you strategically plan and provide opportunities for learners or colleagues to engage in self-reflection as part of their ongoing experience in the classroom/ workplace?
- **TIME:** How do you purposefully plan time for self-reflection at different phases of learning or teaching?
- **ENVIRONMENT:** How do you consider whether the environment supports and fosters self-reflection (static versus interactive displays; layout)?
- **LANGUAGE:** How do you use the language of self-reflection in order to provide learners or colleagues with the vocabulary to be able to describe and reflect on their own learning?
- **INTERACTIONS:** How do you engage in thoughtful conversations and learning conferences with learners or colleagues about their learning/experiences?
- **EXPECTATIONS:** How do you focus on the value of constructive and critical reflections that help to drive learning or practice forward?
- **ROUTINES:** How do you use scaffolds and prompts to support the development of self-reflective capabilities in your learners or colleagues?

### How can self-reflection be undertaken and encouraged in others?

- Utrecht University<sup>6</sup> puts forward 3 ways of encouraging self-reflection in others. The first of these is providing “significant learning experiences that are relevant, engaging, and challenge students (such as challenging readings, observations, or experiences)” (p. 2). The second is giving “prompts to students to guide their self-reflection (e.g., ask students to describe how they felt about their actions/experiences, ask them to put these events in a larger context of theories and/or experiences)” (P.2) and the third is asking “students to make a product of their reflections: through an oral discussion, a written assignment, or a combination of both (P.2)
- The author draws on the above to provide a useful series of age-matched self-reflection strategies drawn from more recent literature, these strategies being 'matched' to the age of different self-reflectors. Within each, he details a literature-based learning experience, prompt, and product. For example, adults may undertake a self-reflection walking route using self-reflection triangles as a prompt. The product could be a personal blog.

<sup>6</sup> Utrecht University (n.d.). *Reflection in Community Engaged Learning*. Utrecht University. [https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/uglobe%20community\\_engagement\\_learning\\_reflection.pdf](https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/uglobe%20community_engagement_learning_reflection.pdf)

The full documents can be downloaded from:

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