



Using critical reflection to get the most out of your learning

Should I use this resource?

Yes! Critical reflection will help you get the most from your learning experiences, from a teamwork assignment through to a formal work placement or an activity that didn't work out. Critical reflection strategies can be the key to better results and more confidence. They can save you lots of time by focusing your energies on what matters. The ability to reflect critically is also often tested in interviews by recruiting firms and employers, so pay this some attention!

What is critical reflection?

Through critical reflection, we draw on our experiences to question our conscious and unconscious values, beliefs and assumptions. Fisher (2010, p. 321) defines these as follows:

- Values are principles to live by: what is important to me as an individual;
- Beliefs are my understanding of the way the world works; and
- Assumptions are the premises or understandings that underpin my values and beliefs.

Why am I being asked to engage in critical reflection?

Critical reflection involves examining the past in order to learn from what happened. It enables all aspects of an experience to be taken into account. By reflecting critically, we can better understand how our thinking and behaviour enables or constrains our own practice and the practice of others.

Why is critical reflection important for employability development?

- Critical reflection underpins the self- and career-related identity work needed to conceptualise, create and sustain work that has meaning to us as individuals;
- Critical reflection helps us to make sense of our learning and experiences so that we can maximise the benefits;
- By looking for insights and maximising self-awareness, critical reflection contributes to our personal, professional and social identity; and
- By adopting critical reflection, we can make more informed decisions about our futures. This fosters continuous improvement and enhances our access to new opportunities.

You can find lots of examples of reflective writing [here](#), in a resource from Pete Watton, Jane Collings and Jenny Moon at the University of Exeter (2001).

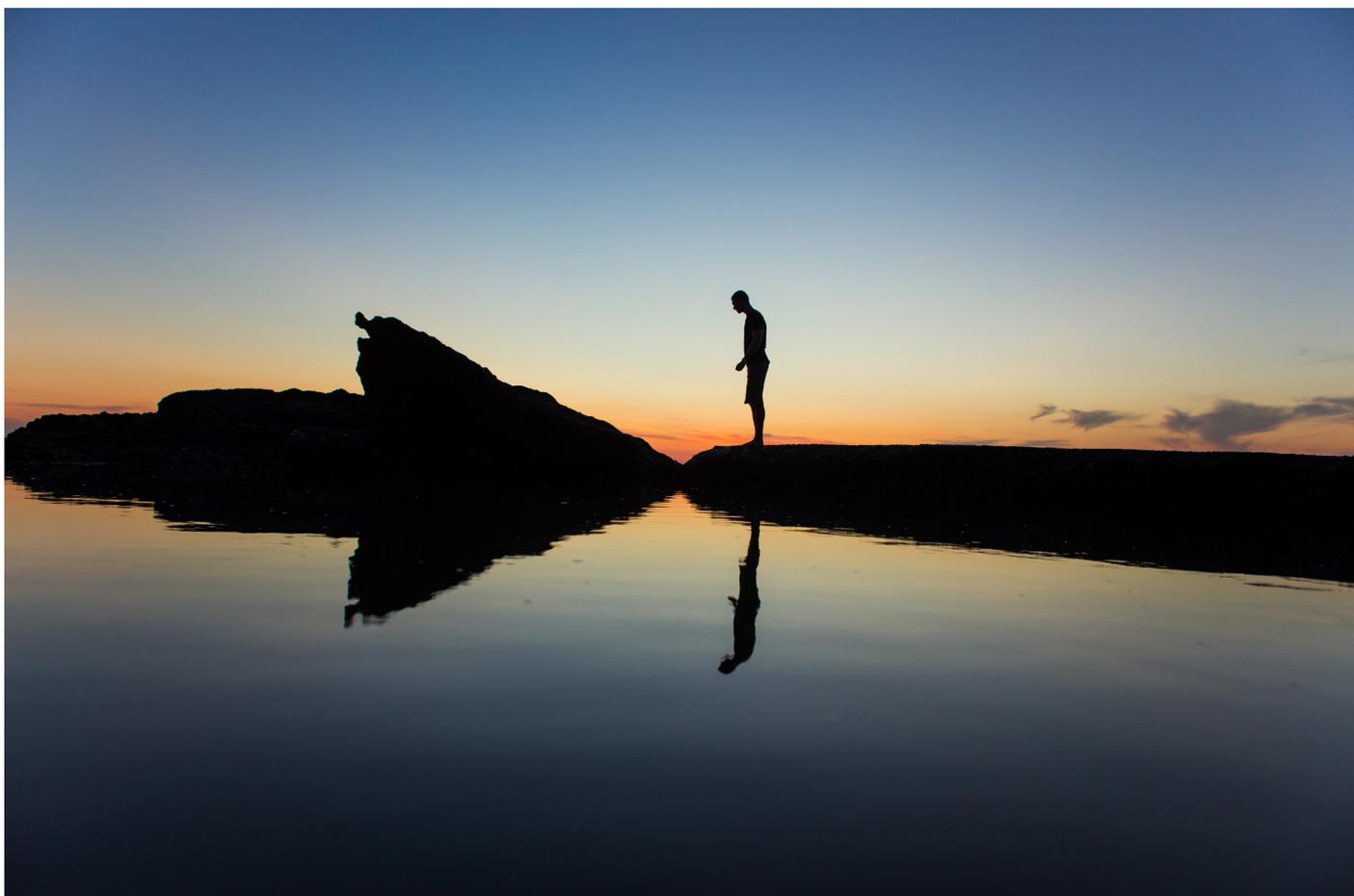


Image 1. Seth Willingham via Unsplash

Strategy 1: Strands of reflection

This strategy uses a model originally developed for surgeons. The model relates to critical incident analysis. When using this template, organise your reflection into the four, broad strands with a heading for each.

Factual strand: Description of event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? • What did you feel like, think and do? • What were the key moments (positive and negative)? • Why were those moments key?
Retrospective strand: Reflect on the experience as a whole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In retrospect, what would you change, and why? • What did you learn about yourself? • What did you learn about other people? • What new understandings arose from the experience?
Sub-stratum strand: Understand your values, beliefs and assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have you learned about being a member of your profession or discipline? • What discipline-specific knowledge, practices and personal experiences were used? • What beliefs and values impacted what you did and your interpretation of others? • What moral and ethical issues were raised for you?
Connective strand: Relate what you have learned to other contexts (personal, professional, other)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the experience influenced the way you might act in the future? • How has the experience influenced the way in which you think about your future? • As a result of the experience, what do you need to find out more about, and why?

Adapted from de Cossart and Fish (2005) and Waring and Evans (2015).

Sources

Waring M., & Evans, C. (2015). *Understanding pedagogy: Developing a critical approach to teaching and learning*. New York: Routledge.

De Cossart, D., & Fish, D. *Cultivating a thinking surgeon: New perspectives on clinical teaching, learning and assessment*. Shrewsbury: TFM Publishing Limited.

Strategy 2: Critically analysing an experience

This strategy uses critical incident analysis, in which an incident is deemed 'critical' because of the way we look at it. The incident on which you reflect might be a regular, everyday event. You might not change your position as a result of the critical reflection, but you will have re-examined your position.

Remember to think about the three components of critical reflection, below. These underpin our thinking and behaviour.

My values: What is important to me as an individual;

My beliefs: My understanding of the way the world works; and

The assumptions that underpin my values and beliefs.

(Fisher, 2010)

The points on the following page will help you to structure your reflections; you can amend or add to these questions, but don't avoid them altogether!

Sources

Adapted from Birmingham City University's work using McAteer, Hallett and Murtagh's (2010) framework.

McAteer, M., Hallett and F. Murtagh, L. (2010) Achieving your Masters in Teaching and Learning. Exeter: Learning Matters.

Critical incident analysis

1. What happened, where and when?
2. Give a brief history (the context) of what happened.
3. What is it that made the incident 'critical'?
4. What were your immediate thoughts and responses?
5. What are your thoughts now?
6. What has changed/developed your thinking?
7. What have you learned about (your) practice from this?
8. How might your practice change and develop as a result of this analysis and learning?

Strategy 3: Critical reflection using Smyth's reflection on action

Strategy 3 uses Smyth's (1989) framework for 'reflection on action'. The framework prompts us to understand our experiences at an individual level and in relation the broader context.

In this example, the questions broaden the approach to incorporate our experiences before, in, and after action. Each heading on the left-hand-side might form a separate paragraph, or you may choose to create headings for each perspective.

Describe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did I do? • What did other people do?
Inform (analyse)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why was I there? • What was I feeling at the start? • What went well, and not so well? • What was I feeling afterwards?
Confront (self-awareness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was I trying to achieve? • What values, beliefs and assumptions, impacted my behaviour?
Reconstruct (evaluate and synthesise)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where did these ideas come from? • What constrains my practice in situations like this? • How might these constraints be overcome? • What opportunities are there as a result of this experience? • What actions do I need to take as a result of this experience and my reflection? • How have my values, beliefs and assumptions been impacted?

Sources

Smyth, J. (1989). Developing and sustaining critical reflection in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 2-9.

Waring M., & Evans, C. (2015). *Understanding pedagogy: Developing a critical approach to teaching and learning*. New York: Routledge.

Strategy 4: Critical reflection using Kolb and Fry's experiential circle

Strategy 4 uses Kolb and Fry's (1975) experiential circle, which features the four elements shown below.

1. Experiencing
2. Observing and experiencing
3. Forming abstract concepts
4. Testing in or anticipating new situations

Remember that the learning cycle can start at any of the four elements and that it is continuous.

For your critical reflection, start by considering the event or experience and then reflect on the impacts of your actions or behaviour. From this, it is possible to consider what other actions or behaviours might be possible and in what circumstances these would be beneficial. You can draw some possible reflective questions or guidance from the other templates in this package.

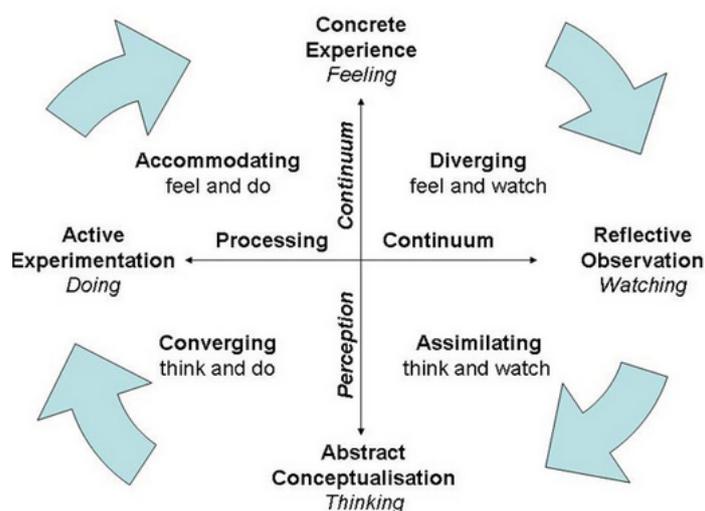


Figure 1. Kolb and Fry's experiential circle (1975), illustrated in Smith (2001, 2010)

Sources

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Smith, M. K. (2001, 2010). 'David A. Kolb on experiential learning', the encyclopedia of informal education. Available from: <http://infed.org/mobi/david-a-kolb-on-experiential-learning/>.

Strategy 5: Critical reflection using Gibb's reflective cycle

Strategy 5 uses employs Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, which encourages us to think critically and systematically about the phases of an experience or activity.

Structure your reflection using each heading in the left column of the table on the following page. These headings align with the headings in this visual. The sample questions are included only as a guide.

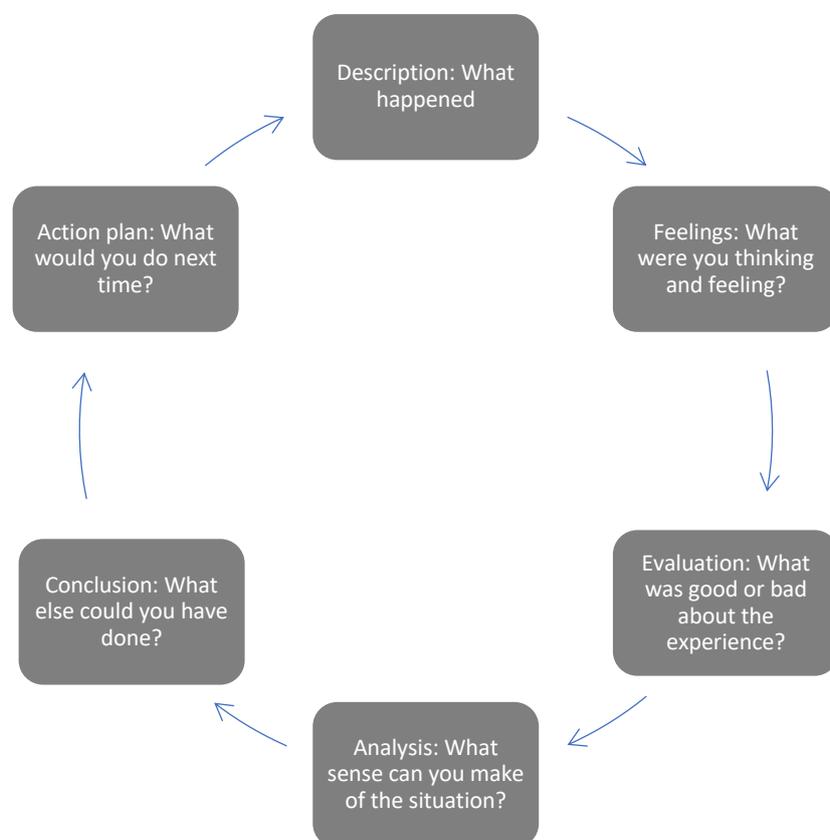


Figure 2. Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle

Source

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic

Critical reflection template using Gibbs' reflective cycle

Description: What happened?	Sample questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where were you? • Who else was there? • Why were you there? • What were you doing? • What were other people doing? • What was the context of the event? • What happened? • What was your part in this? • What parts did the other people play? • What was the result?
Feelings: What were you thinking and feeling?	Sample questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel when the event started? • What were you thinking about at the time? • How did it make you feel? • How did other people make you feel? • How did you feel about the outcome of the event? • What do you think about it now?
Evaluation: What was good or bad about the experience?	Sample questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? • What was good about the experience? • What was not so good about the experience?

<p>Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation?</p>	<p>Sample questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What went well? • What did you do well? • What did others do well? • What went wrong or did not turn out how it should have done? • In what way did you contribute to the outcomes? • In what did others contribute to the outcomes?
<p>Conclusion: What else could you have done?</p>	<p>Sample questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might I have done differently? • What might others have done differently?
<p>Action Plan: What would you do next time?</p>	<p>Sample questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might I do differently next time? • When might I encounter a similar experience? • What actions should I take before I encounter a similar experience?

This resource was developed by Professors Dawn Bennett and Carol Evans for the Developing EmployABILITY initiative.