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# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR WORKPLACE LEADERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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*By far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection – reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting.*

*Jack Mezirow, 1990. P. 13*

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**A**s workplace leaders, reflective practice is probably one of the most important skills that we can nurture in ourselves. We can only make intentional changes to those things that we are consciously aware of, including our actions, reactions, and how we make meaning of the events in our lives. It involves learning how to observe the observer, stepping back to witness our own subjective experience, and making our personal underlying ‘operating system’ transparent. Robert Kegan (1994) describes our evolving consciousness as “liberating ourselves from that in which we were embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can ‘have it’ rather than ‘be had by it’” (p. 34). In the context of higher education, we are often called to think on our feet, and respond thoughtfully to emerging complex issues. This article provides a brief overview of some approaches to the practice of reflection as a core leadership ability.

**D**onald Schon (1983), with his book *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* is credited as a pioneer thinker who popularized the term reflective practice. He described two aspects of reflection that he coined reflection-in-action (a kind of intuitive, tacit knowing and doing that occurs in the here-and-now awareness) and reflection-on-action (a cognitive thought process that occurs after an event as part of an ongoing learning process). Other pioneers in the field of experiential learning include Terry Borton, David Kolb, and Graham Gibbs, but I particularly appreciate Schon’s framing for the purposes of this article. Let’s start with reflection-on-action, and consider the ways we think about and process incidents/interactions/behaviours after the fact.

## Reflection-on-action

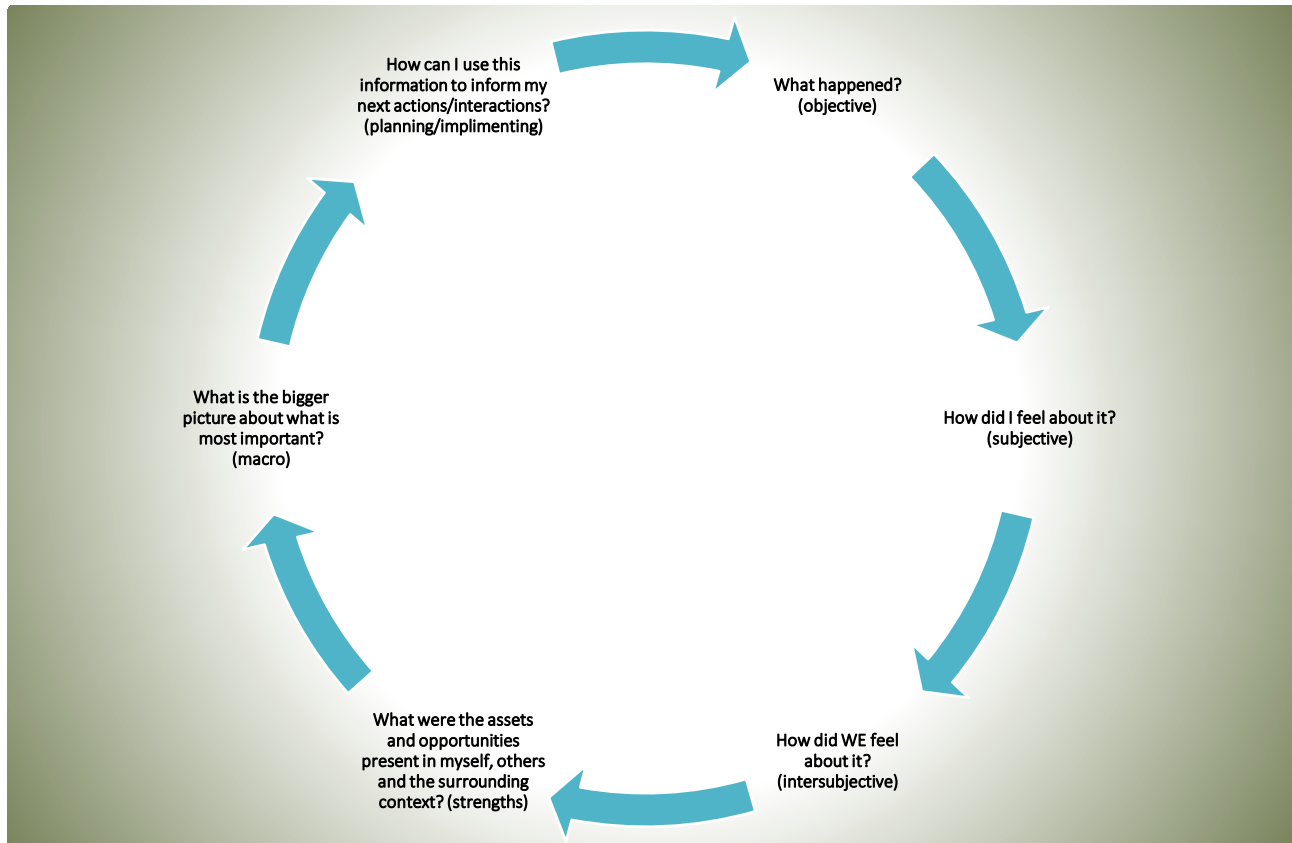
How often have you left an interaction, such as a staff meeting or a one-on-one conversation with a colleague, thinking “oh! I wish I hadn’t said that! I should have said this!” In its most basic form, this is reflective practice. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20 and we can often see ways that we might have improved what we said or how we behaved after the event is over. If we really want to maximize this kind of reflection, we can develop a habit of being more intentional. Whether an interaction goes well or not so well, we can plan to reflect on it, learning lessons that can be applied in future interactions. A typical model would look like a cycle where we assess, plan, implement and then evaluate our actions and interactions. The evaluation feeds back into the next action/interaction. Kolb (1984) calls the phases of the cycle *experience* → *observe/reflect* → *form new concepts* → *test*. Gibb’s (1988) model labels it *description* → *feelings* → *evaluation* → *analysis* → *conclusion* → *action plan*. Borton (1970) simply asks the questions: *What?* → *So what?* → *Now what?*

In the assessment phase, we might decide to structure the kinds of questions we ask ourselves with greater purpose, as we gather information. For this intentional reflection, I like to take into consideration multiple lenses including: objective, subjective, intersubjective, strengths, and macro perspectives (see side bar).

With reflection-on-action, the assessment phase is key. Spending time gathering data about what happened leads to a much more effective plan of action for approaching similar situations in the future. To complete the process, decide on a course of action based on the assessment, then implement the plan, and afterwards spend time evaluating how it worked. The evaluation phase is much like the initial assessment phase. And so the cycle of learning continues, with each iteration hopefully yielding better results.

## MULTIPLE REFLECTIVE PERSPECTIVES

1. **Objective lens** (*descriptive, factual observations, including intended and unintended outcomes*): What did I see? What did I say? What did the other person/people do and say? What were other contributing factors? What was the surrounding context and situation? What resulted?
2. **Subjective lens** (*interior qualities of thoughts, feelings, emotions, bodily physical sensations*): How did I feel? (Physically, in my body and emotionally?) What thoughts were going through my mind? Looking back, what are my thoughts, feelings and emotions about it now? How has that shifted since the event?
3. **Intersubjective lens** (*the space between us*): How would I describe the interior qualities of my relationships (such as awareness of tension, resonance, dissonance, coherence, synergy, etc.) – the felt sense between us? How do I think the other people were feeling? How would I know that?
4. **Strengths lens**: What worked well? What assets did I and others bring to bear? What gifts might have been present but hidden just below the surface? What are the opportunities? What other resources are available in the surrounding environment?
5. **Macro-lens** (*the big picture*): Step back from the experience and look at it holistically. Look for patterns, insights, and future questions for exploration. What perspective am I privileging? What frame or lens am I viewing things and making meaning through? What are my biases and assumptions? Where am I choosing to put my focus? What do I think I may be ignoring or not attending to (consciously or unconsciously)? What are my larger goals? How does it fit in with my biggest vision and purpose?



## Cycle of reflection-on-action learning

I recall an interaction with a colleague when I reacted with some irritation to a comment they made. I went away feeling agitated and recognized that I could have handled it better. After spending some time reflecting on what might have been going on for that person, why I had been so reactive, and what my actual intentions and aspirations were for that relationship, I decided to set some time aside to meet again. Although I felt nervous, and a part of me would have been happy to avoid it, I also knew in my heart the value of courageous conversations.

During our follow up conversation, I made sure to start with a strength-based perspective, noting some of the many things that I appreciated about working with them, apologizing for being short-tempered the last time, and clarifying my intention to develop a more effective working relationship. This interaction opened up a new level of authenticity and trust, setting the stage for a much more productive, engaged, and respectful working relationship moving forward. Since then, we have both been able to build on that positive experience when other difficult situations arise.

Being open to experimentation, having an attitude of curiosity, and being willing to live at the edge of uncertainty are valuable dispositions for this kind of intentional reflection and action. It is not easy to step out of our box and try something a bit different. Forces of habit are very persistent – even on a neurological level. There is no guarantee of success when trying something new. But when we are transparent about our intentions with those we are working with, success is more likely. When we model openness, vulnerability, and humanity, we are also inviting others to engage in a dynamic process of learning. After all, this is what we ask of our students every day.

Reflecting-on-action requires attention and intention. It can be an individual practice, simply thinking about things after the fact. I find structure helps me to be more intentional, and have often used a reflective journal to keep track of my thoughts and insights. Setting SMART goals can be helpful as well (That is, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely). Another strategy is to gather together a group of colleagues that meet regularly for reflective dialogue. Putting thoughts “out there” in some form, helps to make it more visible. The more we can see our thoughts and feelings, the greater our awareness is.

I appreciate having colleagues to debrief with. Finding a group of people that I feel safe enough to take the risk of being vulnerable, where I feel open to feedback and sharing ideas, can be hugely rewarding. Not only can it help to develop reflective skills, but it also helps me realize “I am not alone”. Others also struggle with similar challenges. It provides an opportunity to debrief challenging situations, but it is also a great way to celebrate successes and build on capacities. In groups, we can have the opportunity to show each other appreciation and “elevate strengths” as David Cooperrider would say (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003).

The practice of mindfulness is another tool that can help us to be more present and responsive in all of our interactions. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) defines mindfulness as the intentional cultivation of nonjudgmental moment-to-moment awareness. Mindfulness can be fostered through a regular sitting meditation practice, where the instruction is simply to observe whatever is arising in the field of awareness without getting caught up in it. Mindfulness practice helps us recognize that thoughts, perceptions, bodily sensations, and emotions come and go like the weather, and we don’t need to react, just observe with open curiosity. It helps create some space between thoughts/feelings and actions. Breath can be used as an anchor to the present moment whenever thoughts, stories, planning, worries etc. hijack the mind. Mindfulness is a practice that can be engaged in any time throughout the day, not just as a sitting meditation practice. Whenever we take a moment to pause and wake up, “coming to our senses”, as Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) would say, paying attention to what is going on around us, we are engaging in mindfulness practice. Through mindfulness, we can learn to slow down, taking time to respond to emerging situations rather than reacting to them out of an automated habit.

## Reflection-in-action

Reflecting-on-action is an ongoing journey of continuing to learn from our experiences, with each new experience feeding in to future opportunities. Although the feedback loop is somewhat delayed, this process can help us be more prepared for effective engagement in the moment of an interaction by helping to set an intention. It lays the foundation for reflecting-in-action, which adds another dimension and skill level to this practice.

Can you recall a situation where you were aware of what was happening in the moment and you were moving between consciously making decisions about how to respond and just allowing an intuitive response to unfold? This kind of reflection is much more akin to surfing, or riding a bike. The feedback loop of awareness and altering behaviour is happening in real time as the event is unfolding. There is a kind of hyper alertness – “spidey senses” to everything that is going on and an agility in responsiveness. At the same time, there is a kind of trust in the emerging process, recognizing that there is much going on outside of your control. Donald Schon (1983) uses the metaphor of jazz musicians that learn to engage in a kind of emergent dialogue with each other, to describe reflection-in-action.

Reflecting-in-action requires not just intention and attention, but also agility. Again, it can be helpful to use similar lens categories as was outlined for reflection-in-action. Simultaneously, I am attending to objective, subjective, intersubjective, strengths and macro lenses. But at the same time, there is a point of letting go and allowing myself to enter into the unknown potential within the emerging moment. Surfing.

This level of awareness is not easy and takes a lifetime of practice, while paradoxically, it is also simple, and available to us immediately with a slight shift in perspective. It does involve a willingness to take risks,

## REFLECTION-IN-ACTION QUESTIONS

1. **Objectively**, what is actually happening in this moment? Who is present? Where are we? What is the atmosphere like? Is it conducive to a difficult or a creative conversation?
2. **Subjectively**, the first place to start is with our bodily sensations. Ask: How am I feeling right now? What’s happening in my body? Am I feeling my heart racing, a lump in my throat, tension in my shoulders, flushing in my cheeks, or a rock in the pit of my stomach? These are really important clues about what is going on.
3. **Inter-subjectively**, it’s about paying attention to the dynamic and energy between us. What am I picking up from the other person or people in this interaction? What verbal and non-verbal cues are they putting off that could help me discern how they are feeling, or what they might be thinking beneath their words? What is the history of our relationship that is influencing this moment, and our expectations and assumptions about each other?
4. From a **strengths lens**, what do I notice as good, true, and/or beautiful in this moment? What do I appreciate right now and how might I show it?
5. From a **macro lens**, it is worth keeping in mind at all times what the larger intention is. What are my values? What are the intentions I have set for how I want to be in relationship? What are my biggest goals for the future, in terms of my working relationships and work related shared vision? What is it that is wanting to emerge right now, and how can I leverage this moment as an opportunity?

make mistakes and learn from experience. Otto Scharmer (2009) talks about the need to have an “open mind, open heart, and open will”. Open mind requires the ability to suspend old habits, but is often blocked by our internal voice of judgement. Open heart requires the ability to empathize with another’s perspective, but is often blocked by our internal voice of cynicism. Open will requires us to let go of old ways of doing things, but is often blocked by our inner voice of fear (Scharmer, 2009).

**M**uch like the way journaling or dialoging can assist with the process of reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action can be enhanced by giving voice in the moment to what is arising in the subjective, objective, intersubjective, strengths, and macro field of awareness. Bodily sensations can often be an early cue of something worth slowing down and attending to. Pay extra attention to sensations of dissonance or irritation. Also, pay close attention to sensations of resonance and connection. What might these visceral feelings be trying to tell me? What would happen if I took the risk of sharing what I am feeling out loud? For example, I might say “I’m feeling a bit nervous right now and not sure where to go from here. Let’s just step back and pay attention to what’s going on.” In my experience this transparent approach creates room for authenticity and connection to occur.

**A**s part of the strengths lens, *Appreciative Inquiry* is an approach that can help us enter into our interactions as agents of positive change. Rather than being focused on solving problems, the focus shifts towards our individual and collective strengths and assets. David Cooperrider (2003) calls this the 80/20 reversal. Rather than spending most of our energies (80%) attending to what is wrong in a given situation, which seems to be what our habit often is, the call is to flip it around and spend the majority (80%) of our energy and attention on what is right. This doesn’t mean avoiding or ignoring the problems, but recognizing that we grow in the direction that we attend to. As Buckminster Fuller said, “you never change things by fighting existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete” (in Cooperrider, 2016).

**I** love Plato’s core values of The Good, The True and The Beautiful as guideposts for my internal compass. As Barbara Fredrickson (1998) points out, focusing on what is working well fosters positive emotions that broaden our modes of thinking and action, which builds personal and social resources, and adds to our in-the-moment repertoire of responses. We can do this for ourselves and each other by actively paying attention and giving feedback when we notice something positive. Where negative emotion constricts our view, attending to the good, true and beautiful in life cultivates joy, hope, and inspiration, and creates more possibilities.

## Conclusion

As workplace leaders in higher education engaged in the ongoing practice of reflection, we may come to realize that “we are what we do”, and that excellence is not an act, but a habit (Cooperrider, 2016). Through mindful attention to our actions and interactions, perhaps we come to see that “there is no outside and inside, only the creative unfolding of an entire field of relations” (Cooperrider, 2016, p. 5). As we mature, we are able to take on a broader and deeper vantage point, and become more sensitive to how the past influences the present, and the present influences the future. We begin looking for ways to attune, reframe and transform every moment (Torbert, 2004).

Leadership calls us to be able to see our current operating system, and explore our habitual patterns of perception. Reflective practice helps us to consciously step out of pre-existing perspectives and surface deep assumptions as a starting point for creating new knowledge and new possibilities. For complex situations, we need to go beyond cognitive processes to include existential reflection of underlying purpose, meaning, and will (Torbert, 2004).

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