

# The stairway to critical thinking

Use critical thinking to develop arguments, draw conclusions, make inferences and identify implications.		<b>Justify</b>
Transfer the understanding you have gained from your critical evaluation and use in response to questions, assignments and projects.		<b>Apply</b>
Assess the worth of an idea in terms of its relevance to your needs, the evidence on which it is based and how it relates to other pertinent ideas.		<b>Evaluate</b>
Bring together different sources of information to serve an argument or idea you are constructing. Make logical connections between the different sources that help you shape and support your ideas.		<b>Synthesise</b>
		<b>Compare</b>
		Explore the similarities and differences between the ideas you are reading about
		<b>Analyse</b>
		Examine how these key components fit together and relate to each other.
<b>Describe</b>	<b>Understand</b>	Comprehend the key points, assumptions, arguments and evidence presented.
<b>Process</b>	Take in the information i.e. what you have read, heard, seen or done.	

Source: Williams (2014). For more on the stairway, see *Getting Critical* 2nd edn p. 14 in this series.

## Theme 1.4 Learning styles

In order to be able to use the 'metaphorical mirror' effectively and to examine your practice in a thorough and thoughtful way, a high level of self-awareness is essential, and you can achieve this in part through self-evaluation. A vital aspect of this process is to understand more about your learning styles – this will help you to gain more from your course and to understand both your strengths and potential areas for development.

*'In order to ensure my journey is a successful one, I believe that it is essential to have a good balance of all four learning styles.'*

Honey and Mumford (2000) have carried out extensive work on the subject of learning styles and have identified the following four distinct styles.

- **Activists** are doers and like to be involved in new experiences. They are open-minded and enthusiastic about new ideas. They enjoy getting on with things and can achieve a lot in a short space of time
- **Reflectors** are thinkers who like to stand back and look at a situation from different perspectives. They enjoy collecting data and thinking about things carefully before coming to any conclusions. They often observe others and listen to their views before offering their own
- **Theorists** are analytical people who integrate their observations into sound theories. They think problems through in a step-by-step way. They can be perfectionists who like to fit things into a rational scheme or model. They have an ability to see things in a detached and objective way
- **Pragmatists** are practical people who are keen to try out new ideas. They prefer concepts that can be applied easily in practice. They enjoy problem solving and decision making

Most of us have a preference for more than one style. Strengths in all styles denote a strong, all round learner – so in order to gain most from your studies it is important to know your least preferred styles, as this will give you clear areas to work on as you progress.

## What does it mean to write reflectively?

In order to begin writing reflectively, you need to understand what reflective writing is, and equally what it is not. Here are some characteristics of reflective writing.

Reflective writing is:

- Always written in the first person (I ...) with a focus on yourself
- Generally more personal than other forms of academic writing
- Helpful when you are asked to evaluate your experiences
- Focused on your experiences, thoughts, feelings and assumptions
- A form of self-supervision
- Honest and spontaneous
- Subjective
- A record of your thoughts and experiences that you can return to
- An investment of time.

Reflective writing is not:

- Simply a description of what happened
- Written in the third person with a focus on others
- Calculated
- Objective
- Something that can be rushed
- Simply about planning what you will do next time.

Reflective writing helps us to link our ideas together and discover meanings from the things we see and experience. Our understandings become broader and deeper as we question our approaches to people and circumstances. Like any other skill, reflective writing is one that will improve with practice. Indeed reflection itself is a skill which also improves over time. As you progress, you will find that your learning will become deeper as a result of your investment of time in writing reflectively.

## Theme 3.1 Driscoll's 'What?' model

When you are new to reflective practice, a simple, straightforward model can be a useful way of helping you to get started; Driscoll's (2007) 'What?' model is one of these. It has the following three steps:

- **What?** – Step 1 encourages you to write a description of an event that has happened in your professional practice.
- **So what?** – Step 2 involves carrying out an analysis of the event by reflecting on selected aspects of it.
- **Now what?** – Step 3 asks you to devise a number of proposed actions following the experience and in the light of what you have learned.

Driscoll's model, which reflects the work of Borton (1970), is drawn as a circle with arrows pointing clockwise, showing how the three stages follow on from one another. However, a number of arrows can be drawn following Stage 3 to illustrate a variety of actions that could be taken following an experience.

Driscoll has also formulated a number of useful trigger questions to help you to use the model effectively, including:

- **Step 1** – What was my reaction to the experience and what did others do who were involved?
- **Step 2** – Do I feel troubled? If so, in what way?
- **Step 3** – How can I modify my practice if I face a similar situation again and what are the main learning points that I can take from this?

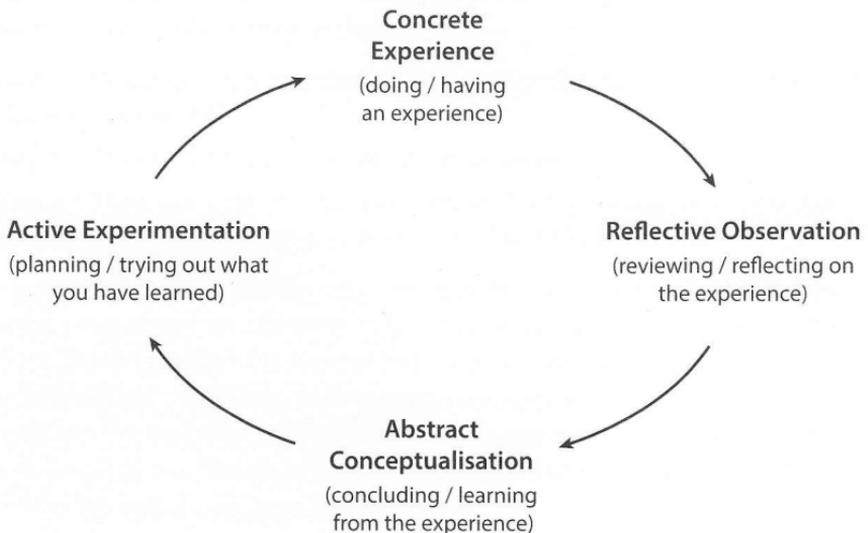
Many people who are completely new to reflective practice find Driscoll's model a very useful starting point for their early reflections. It is simple and easy to remember. However, after a time you may find that you need to reflect at a deeper level in relation to your developing practice. So do not be afraid to use this model in the early days and then to move onto others. This will mean that your skills of reflection develop alongside the other key skills that you use in professional practice.

# Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Many writers on the subject of reflective practice use cycles to describe how we learn from experience. These cycles enable us to understand the process as well as developing the ability to improve our learning and professional practice over time.

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle gives insights into how we all learn from experience. There are four stages in the cycle which are depicted as following on from each other, as shown by the arrows in the diagram below.

Kolb argues that this cycle often (but not always) starts with a concrete experience that is reviewed through reflective observation. This is followed by abstract conceptualisation where new thoughts and ideas emerge, which are then tried out in active experimentation, ready for the next relevant experience. All of this may happen in a matter of moments, or over days,



**Figure 1** Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

## Theme 6.3 Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Having considered the role of our feelings in professional practice, we can use theoretical models to help us to understand more about how we process these. Gibbs' (1998) Reflective Cycle is particularly useful and is depicted below.

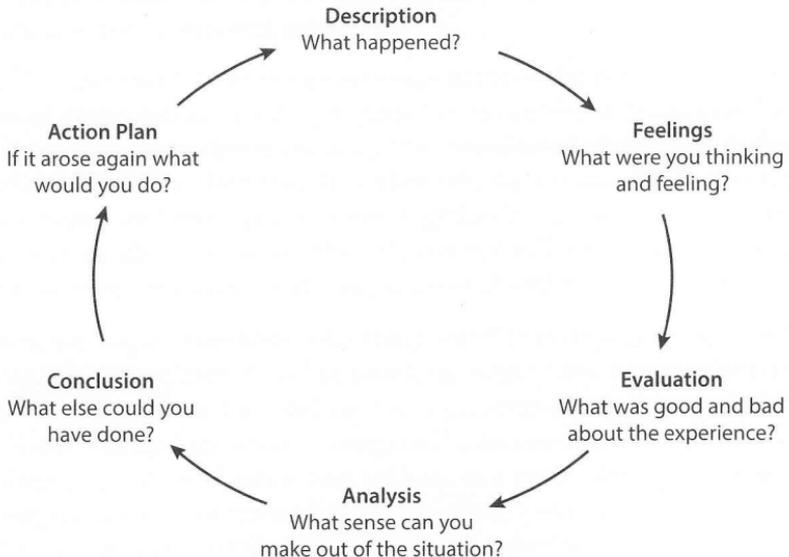


Figure 3 Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

Many people find the prompt questions on the cycle particularly helpful in making the model practical and easy to apply to their work. For those who are supporting people in challenging circumstances, the second point on the cycle with its focus on feelings is particularly important. It would be foolish to think that a professional practitioner who is asked to work in an empathic way would not have emotional responses to the situations of their clients. As we know, this is not how we function as human beings.

## Theme 10.1 The Integrated Reflective Cycle

In this journal, we have examined a range of theoretical approaches and practical issues in relation to reflective practice. We began our journey with an exploration of some seminal literature on reflective practice, which encourages us to learn from our professional experience by evaluating it, in order to improve it. We then progressed towards our destination of critically reflective practice by examining the role of feelings in relation to professional practice, followed by a consideration of how we make assumptions and the importance of challenging these in order to practise in a critically reflective way. To do this, the importance of considering our own ethics and values was discussed and the importance of reflecting with others was highlighted as part of this process.

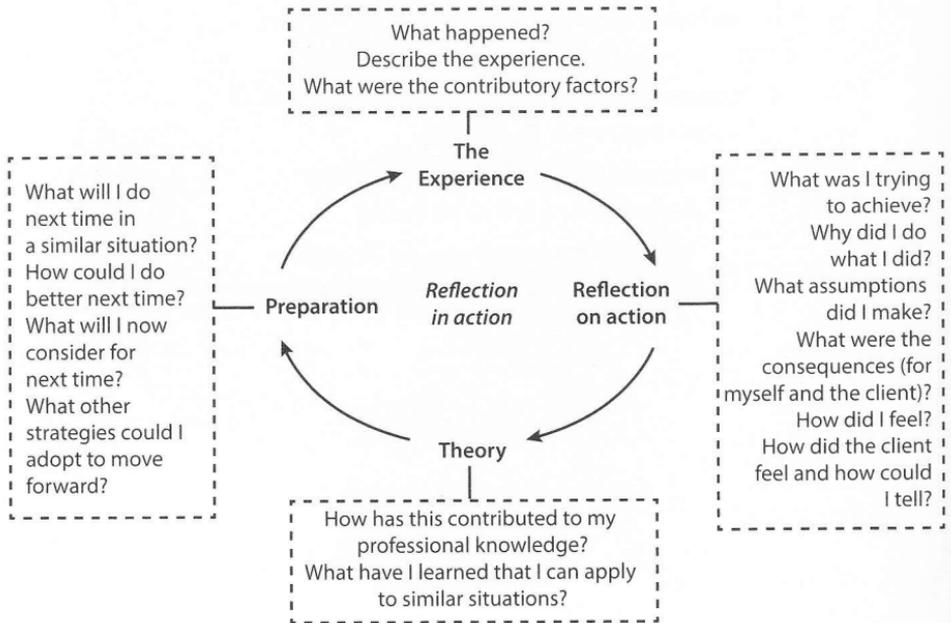


Figure 7 *The Integrated Reflective Cycle*