

Reflective learning: Extra notes

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1 Introduction

The following descriptive information has been compiled from a number of sources listed at the end of this summary, which includes extracts from these sources and associated commentary.

This overview seeks to provide social workers and others in the community services field summaries of a number of selective approaches of reflective learning practice and of how this concept supports a broader community of practice with particular relevance to practitioners of social work.¹

The concept of reflective learning develops awareness from the place as service provider participants in client interactions. Reflective learning also has a broader meaning, of not only being aware of expectations we hold for and about clients, but identifying and managing responses to dynamics that arise from a range client situations across a variety of contexts.

There are a number of factors which feed into this broader context, such as social work values, beliefs we hold from our own life experiences, as well as wider cultural and social values.²

The advantage of a reflective approach is to enable us to look beyond the immediate dynamics to also perform a broad scan to dynamically identify and understand the mix of values, attitudes, cultural assumptions and life experiences we may bring to client situations.

It is through reflective learning practice process that we can understand this mix of values, attitudes and assumptions and how these impinge on and shape engagement with a client, their family and understand their values and attitudes and the place of their cultural and life meaning values.

2 Reflective model – Kolb

When you are required to write about, to share and reflect on your own experiences, a helpful and well-established approach is the learning model explicated in chapter 2 by Kolb in *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*.³

¹ Greg Swensen < https://www.planitaerth.com/?page_id=2523 >

² Australian Association of Social Workers, "AASW Practice Standards 2023," AASW, *Australian Association of Social Workers*, 2023, <https://www.aasw.asn.au/about-aasw/ethics-standards/practice-standards/>; Australian Association of Social Workers, *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) 2024 update* (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2024). <https://www.aasw.asn.au/education-employment/higher-education-providers/asweas-2024/>.

³ D A Kolb, "The process of experiential learning " in *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, ed. D A Kolb (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984).

This has been described as Kolb's Learning Styles theory, which identifies four types of learning stages - concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation as summarised below.⁴

These together emphasise that learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and testing new ideas. This reflective model is probably amongst the simplest ones, as it is based on three questions only.⁵

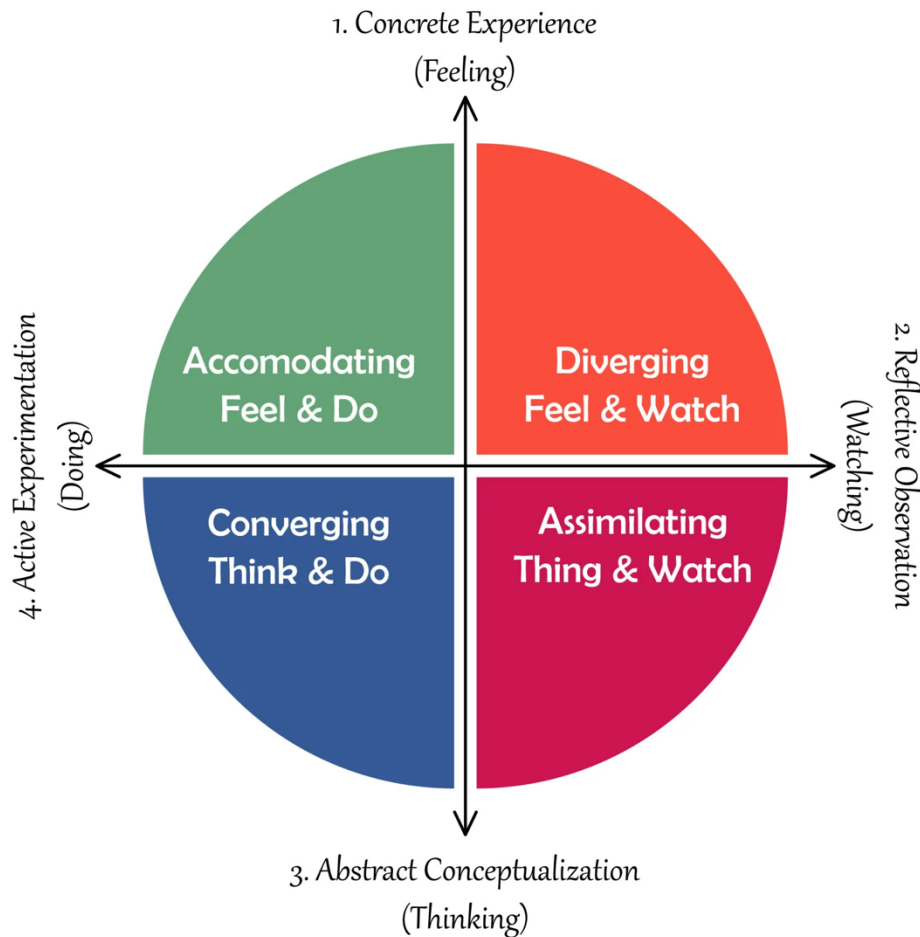
However, this does not mean that the reflections should remain superficial, but should be as comprehensive as possible.⁶

⁴ S McLeod, "Kolb's learning styles and experiential learning cycle," *Simply Psychology*, 2025, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>.

⁵ University of Cumbria, "Rolfe et al's (2001) reflective model," <https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/media/MyCumbria/Documents/ReflectiveModelRolfe.pdf>.

⁶ S McLeod, "What? So what? Now what? Critical reflection model," *Simply Psychology*, 3 September 2024, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/what-so-what-now-what.html>.

Kolb's Learning Cycle



2.1 Overview of reflective approach

Concrete experience

You consciously and physically experience a situation, which makes you realise that you need to reflect systematically in order to learn something new or improve on your existing skill and practice.

At this stage you will make a note of the specific situation and just describe what you see, how you feel and what you think.

Reflective observation

Having written down the description of the experience, it is now time to reflect more deeply on what has happened in that situation.

The questions you need to ask yourself are: what worked? what failed? why did the situation arise? why did others and I behave the way we did?

Abstract conceptualisation

The guiding question for this stage leads on from the questions in the reflective observation stage: what could I have done better or differently? how can I improve?

Initially, you try to find different ways for dealing with the situations and think up strategies for when you experience a similar situation again. Also, this is the stage where you should consult colleagues and literature in order to get a better understanding and further ideas.

Active experimentation

This stage is now practising the newly acquired theoretical knowledge.

You take your own reflections and thoughts about improvements as well as the theories back into your practice and try out the new strategies. Some of them will work, others won't, so this is then automatically the basis for the new cycle, so that the active experimentation stage becomes new "concrete experiences".

2.2 Learning stages

2.2.1 What?

The first stage is a mere description of what happened and of the experience you would like to analyse and take forward for your own learning.

The "What?" stage focuses on objectively describing the experience or event. This involves detailing the facts without interpretation or judgment.

The "What" stage establishes a clear, factual account of the experience, laying the foundation for deeper analysis in the subsequent stages.

It encourages individuals or groups to slow down, step back, and articulate the concrete details of what transpired, without immediately jumping to interpretations, judgments, or emotional responses.

It's crucial to be as comprehensive and objective as possible during this stage to ensure a solid basis for reflection.

2.2.1.1 Key features

Focus on Facts

The emphasis is on providing a neutral and impartial account of the event, sticking to observable and verifiable information.

Sensory recall

Participants are encouraged to replay the event in their mind as if watching it on a movie screen, focusing on what they saw, heard, or felt.

Objectivity Over Subjectivity

While personal experiences are acknowledged, the goal is to describe them in a way that minimizes personal biases and interpretations.

Inclusivity

If reflecting as a group, it's important to hear from different perspectives, as people may have noticed different things

Setting the Stage for Deeper Analysis

The "What?" stage provides the necessary context and factual basis for the subsequent "So What?" and "Now What?" stages, which explore the meaning and implications of the experience.

So what?

Once the description has been completed carefully you should ask yourself what the experience and situation means. To this end you will need to consult literature and colleagues if you are to get a comprehensive insight into the matter, as otherwise you will rely on your own interpretations only.

The "So What?" stage delves into analysis and sense-making. This stage encourages you to examine your feelings, thoughts, and interpretations of the experience.

The goal is to uncover insights and identify what difference the event made. This stage is where analysis, critical thinking, and sense-making take center stage.

2.2.1.2 Key features

Connecting the dots

It involves identifying patterns, relationships, and potential causes and effects related to the experience described in the "What?" stage. Relate the experience to relevant theories, course concepts, or broader ideas

Exploring emotions and reactions

It encourages individuals to examine their feelings, thoughts, and initial interpretations of the experience. Why did they react in a certain way? What assumptions or prior experiences might have influenced their perceptions?

Evaluating impact

Assess the consequences of the event for yourself and others.

Identifying Learning Points:

The goal is to uncover insights, lessons learned, and areas for potential growth based on the experience.

Generating Hypotheses

It can involve developing initial explanations or interpretations of why things happened the way they did, which can later be explored further.

Now what?

At this last stage of Rolfe et al.'s model you are asked to consider the steps you will be

taking in order to improve your practice and learn from the initial experience. You ought to complete a simple action plan with key pointers about what you will do and how you will decide that your practice has improved.

“Now What?” focuses on applying your analysis to determine effective next steps. This involves identifying what you can take away from the experience and how you can use those insights in the future.

It focuses on translating insights and learning from the “What?” and “So What?” stages into concrete plans and actions.

2.2.2 Key features

Applying lessons learned

It encourages individuals to consider how they can use their newfound understanding to make changes in their thinking, behavior, or approach to similar situations. Consider how to share insights or lessons learned with others.

Identify knowledge gaps

Recognize areas where further learning or skill development is needed.

Developing actionable strategies

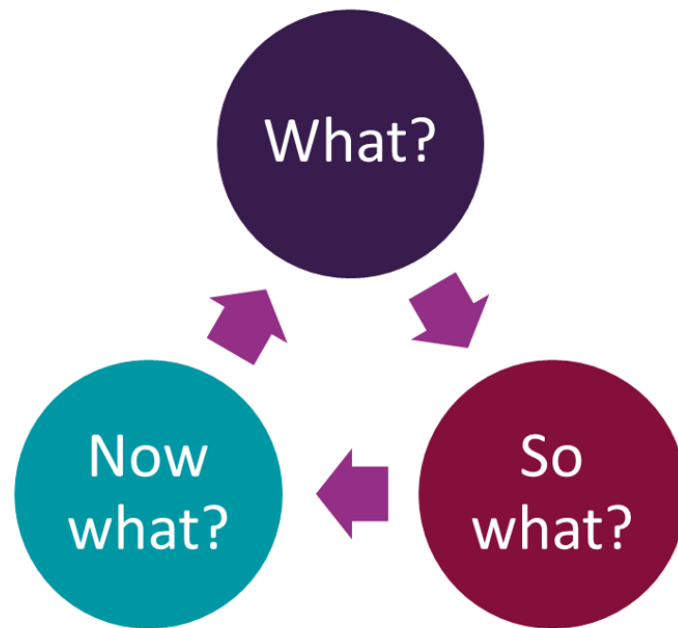
The goal is to create specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals and plans to address the identified learning needs or areas for improvement.

Experimentation and testing

It might involve designing small experiments or tests to try out new approaches or validate hypotheses that emerged during the reflection process.

2.2.2.1 Continual Improvement

The “Now What?” stage emphasizes that reflection and learning are ongoing processes, and it encourages a cycle of planning, action, observation, and further reflection.



2.3 Learning styles

The basis for Kolb's reflective model is our own experience, which is then reviewed, analysed and evaluated systematically in three stages. Once this process has been undergone completely, the new experiences will form the starting point for another cycle.

As Kolb's model has been developed from the importance of understanding that a person's preferred style in how they will approach reflective learning is shaped and determined by both individual and broader factors.

These broader factors include social environment, educational experiences, or the basic cognitive structure of the individual.

Whatever influences the choice of style, the learning style preference itself is actually the product of two pairs of variables, or two separate "choices" that we make, which Kolb presented as lines of an axis, each with "conflicting" modes at either end.

A typical presentation of Kolb's two continuums is that the east-west axis is called the Processing Continuum (how we approach a task), and the north-south axis is called the Perception Continuum (our emotional response, or how we think or feel about it).

Kolb believed that we cannot perform both variables on a single axis simultaneously (e.g., think and feel). Our learning style is a product of these two choice decisions.

It's often easier to see the construction of Kolb's learning styles in terms of a two-by-two matrix. Each learning style represents a combination of two preferred styles. The matrix also demonstrates Kolb's terminology for the four learning styles - diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating.

		AE		RO	
		Perception continuum			
		Doing		Watching	
CE	Processing continuum	Feeling	Accommodator (CE/AE) Adaptable to change Problem-solvers	Diverger (CE/RO) Finds meaning & value Analytical	
AC		Thinking	Converger (AC/AE) Technical learners Independent Practical	Assimilator (AC/RO) Interested in ideas & concepts Observers	

Notes

- CE = Concrete experience
 AC = Abstract conceptualisation
 AE = Active experimentation
 RO = Reflective observation

Table: Kolb's learning styles

2.3.1 Diverging (feeling and watching – CE/RO)

These people are able to look at things from different perspectives. They are sensitive.

They prefer to watch rather than do, tending to gather information and use imagination to solve problems. They are best at viewing concrete situations from several different viewpoints.

Kolb called this style “diverging” because these people perform better in situations that require ideas-generation, for example, brainstorming. People with a diverging learning style have broad cultural interests and like to gather information.

They are interested in people, tend to be imaginative and emotional, and tend to be strong in the arts. People with the diverging style prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind and to receive personal feedback.

2.3.2 Assimilating (watching and thinking – AC/RO)

The assimilating learning preference involves a concise, logical approach. Ideas and concepts are more important than people.

These people require good, clear explanations rather than a practical opportunity. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organizing it in a clear, logical format.

People with an assimilating learning style are less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts. People with this style are more attracted to logically sound theories than approaches based on practical value.

This learning style is important for effectiveness in information and science careers. In formal learning situations, people with this style prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through.

2.3.3 Converging (doing and thinking – AC/AE)

People with a converging learning style can solve problems and will use their learning to find solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks and are less concerned with people and interpersonal aspects.

People with a converging learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. They can solve problems and make decisions by finding solutions to questions and problems.

People with a converging learning style are more attracted to technical tasks and problems than social or interpersonal issues. A converging learning style enables specialist and technology abilities.

People with a converging style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.

2.3.4 Accommodating (doing and feeling – CE/AE)

This style of learning style is “hands-on,” and relies on intuition rather than logic. This group utilises other people’s analysis and prefer to take a practical, experiential approach.

They are attracted to new challenges and experiences, and to carrying out plans. They commonly act on “gut” instinct rather than logical analysis.

People with an accommodating learning style will tend to rely on others for information than carry out their own analysis. This learning style is prevalent within the general population.

3 Reflective model – Gibbs

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle was developed by Graham Gibbs in 1988 to give structure to learning from experiences.⁷

It offers a framework for examining experiences, and given its cyclic nature lends itself particularly well to repeated experiences, allowing you to learn and plan from things that either went well or didn't go well. It covers 6 stages-

⁷ University of Edinburgh, "Gibbs' reflective cycle," *Reflection toolkit*, <https://reflection.ed.ac.uk/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/gibbs-reflective-cycle>.

- 1) Description of the experience
- 2) Feelings and thoughts about the experience
- 3) Evaluation of the experience, both good and bad
- 4) Analysis to make sense of the situation
- 5) Conclusion about what you learned and what you could have done differently
- 6) Action plan for how you would deal with similar situations in the future, or general changes you might find appropriate.

This is a conceptual framework which can enable you to isolate frames and consider key points, which can be undertaken if thought of a series of questions

3.1 What happened

This involves a frame to identify what happened

- 1) What happened?
- 2) When and where did it happen?
- 3) Who was present?
- 4) What did you and the other people do?
- 5) What was the outcome of the situation?
- 6) Why were you there?
- 7) What did you want to happen?

3.2 Your feelings

This is a frame to explore any feelings or thoughts that you had during the experience and how they may have impacted the experience.

- 1) What were you feeling during the situation?
- 2) What were you feeling before and after the situation?
- 3) What do you think other people were feeling about the situation?
- 4) What do you think other people feel about the situation now?
- 5) What were you thinking during the situation?
- 6) What do you think about the situation now?

3.3 Evaluation

This is a frame to try to evaluate what worked and what didn't work in the situation.

- 1) What was good and bad about the experience?
- 2) What went well?
- 3) What didn't go so well?
- 4) What did you and other people contribute to the situation (positively or negatively)?

3.4 Analysis

This frame is to try to make sense of what happened, to determine the meaning from the experience.

- 1) Why did things go well?
- 2) Why didn't it go well?
- 3) What sense can I make of the situation?
- 4) What knowledge – my own or others (for example academic literature) can help me understand the situation?

3.5 Conclusions

This frame is to assist you to draw conclusions about what happened, by summarising your learning and highlight what changes to your actions could improve the outcome in the future.

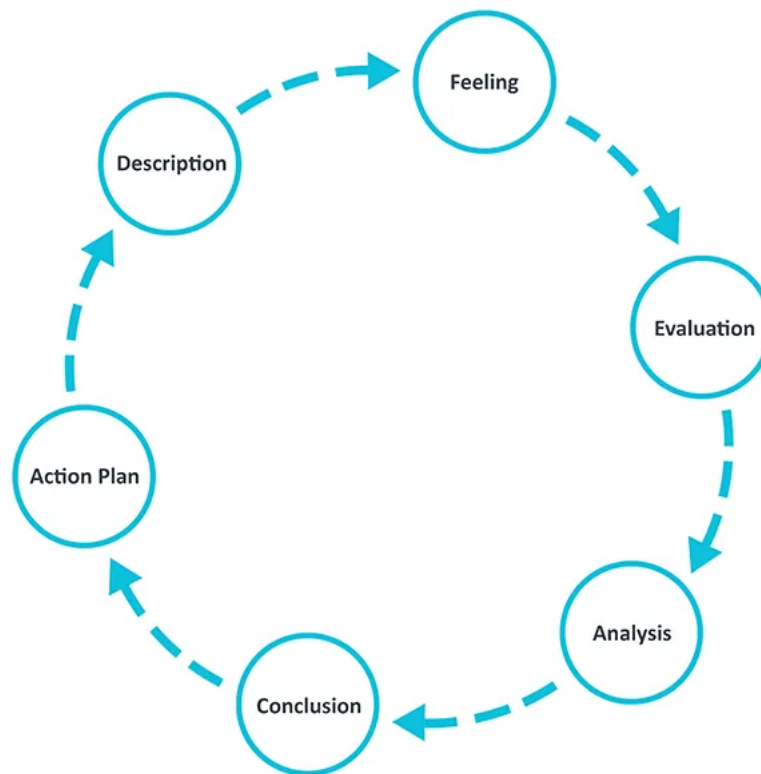
- 1) What did I learn from this situation?
- 2) How could this have been a more positive situation for everyone involved?
- 3) What skills do I need to develop for me to handle a situation like this better?
- 4) What else could I have done?

3.6 Action plan

This frame sets out how might consider what you would do differently in a similar or related situation in the future.

It is an opportunity to only plan what you will do differently, but also how you will make sure it happens.

- 1) If I had to do the same thing again, what would I do differently?
- 2) How will I develop the required skills I need?
- 3) How can I make sure that I can act differently next time?



4 Reflective model – Boud et al

Developed a three stage process – preparation, engagement in the activity and processing.

Reflection involves a general goal of reconstructing experience which is central, continuing and pervasive to reflective processes.

In order to pursue this goal, however, learners need to describe their experience, to work through the attitudes and emotions which might colour their understanding, and to order and make sense of the new ideas and information which they have retained.⁸

4.1.1 Before - Preparation

In the preparatory phase reflective activity occurs when students start to explore what is required of them, what are the demands of the field setting and the resources which they themselves have to bring.

Typically there would be a relatively high level of anxiety present which some students might respond to by additional preparation and which others might respond to by engaging in a minimal amount of advance planning.

⁸ D Boud, R Keogh, and D Walker, eds., *Reflection: Turning experience into learning* (London, UK: Routledge, 1987).

4.1.2 Engagement in activity

The second phase is the actual field experience. Initially the experience may tend to overwhelm, new observations may rapidly follow each other with insufficient chance for them to be organized and the learner may resort to coping strategies which involve doing what is most familiar.

4.1.3 After – Processing

This occurs after the activity has finished and can be separated into steps of firstly returning to the experience and identification of feelings.

Return to the experience

Identify what happened and what you were doing, thinking, and feeling at the time This isn't just recounting facts — it's about noticing your internal and external responses.

Attend to feelings

Acknowledge and work through any strong feelings. Identify and describe emotions hindered or helped your learning. This may involve identification unhelpful feelings (e.g. shame) and to develop confidence to strengthen helpful ones (e.g. empathy, courage).

What is next?

Use new knowledge, perspectives, or theory to make sense of the experience and ask yourself –

- a) What did I learn?
- b) What would I do differently next time?
- c) How has this changed me as a practitioner?

5 Writing entries in a reflective journal

Writing entries for a reflective journal is often a daunting aspect of professional training like social work, as we are not used to writing diaries.

Practitioners can be doubtful about their ability to reflect properly, ask ourselves if they have anything important to reflect on and are unsure of the format such reflections should take.

However, most practitioners who keep reflective diaries more or less regularly, see the long-term benefits and therefore will advocate the use of journals for our students.

Here are some suggested ground rules or basic principles for entries in a reflective journal.

Honesty

Firstly, the entries need to be honest. Unless the journal has to be submitted to a marker as part of an assignment you can keep your entries to yourself and do not need to show anyone.

When you record what happened in your practice, be honest about the situation, about your actions and your feelings, even if this may not paint you in a good light. This is not about showing you off as a perfect teacher, this is about your learning and development.

Systematic reflections

Use a reflective model to make your reflections systematic and meaningful. You may have to experiment with various models before you find one that suits you best. You can obviously also adapt and combine existing models for your own purpose.

The format of the journal

Buy a journal and a pen you like, invest in a journalling app, use the software you already have. The format of the reflections does not matter, whether they are handwritten or typed, in full sentences or bullet points and sketches or diagrams.

Unless this is for an assignment you are in charge of your journal and you decide on the format. You may want to try out different formats to see what works best for you. You just need to make sure that your notes and sketches are legible and clear enough for you to be able to make sense of them a few months down the line.

6 Communities of practice

The process of reflective learning here organically occurs in communities of practice, being collectives of people with shared interests in achieving the same goal⁹.

We should also be aware that in today's globalised and connected world, communities of practice can also be experienced and lived online in support or discussion groups on social media platforms. An example are WhatsApp groups, Facebook etc, where educators discuss specific topic areas and share best practice.

What makes and characterises good communities of practice? In their book *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* Lave and Wenger highlight many aspects in relation to communities of practice.¹⁰

They refer to the practical level, such as the differences between situated learning and traditional apprenticeships. But they also highlight the tensions between the social world of communities of practice and the world of individuals.

YouTube - Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmqLyOLlj0s>

YouTube – Communities of practice
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMfquLXZcgY>

⁹ D Proctor, *Communities of practice: getting to the heart of workplace learning, sharing and innovation*. https://usyd.nikashsingh.com/hht/PROCTOR_CommunitiesOfPractice.pdf.

¹⁰ J Lave and E Wenger, *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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Note - Online book

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