

**Reflective Learning:** ‘It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively.’ (Gibbs 1988)

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods* London, UK: Further Education Unit.

**Top Tip:** Keep comparing theory to practice and exploring the relationship between the two.

**Using theory:** Assignments involving reflective thinking often ask you to refer to both relevant theories and your own experiences, but what does this mean? Academic theories and your professional observations are both evidence that you need to use to support your points, but they are different types of evidence:

**Academic theories** provide a generalised model or framework to help you understand what might be happening in a situation – the Reflective Learning Cycle on page 2 of this guide is an example of a theoretical model – it gives you a structure to compare your own experiences to and language to help you explain what is happening.

**Your own experiences** are what happens in practice; these may be more complex and richer than an abstract model, but it can be harder to see what is relevant. By comparing your experiences to a theory or theories, you can develop some more insightful explanations for what happened. Also use your own experiences to interrogate and question theories – does the theory fit what happened? If not, why? Does the theory only explain part of the story? Does the theory need to be adapted for different situations?

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at [www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice](http://www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice)

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# Reflective thinking



## Practice-based learning 1

Many academic disciplines are closely linked to real world situations and professions and, increasingly, work-based placements can be a valuable aspect of learning. Students are often required to reflect upon their practices, link their reflections to theories and communicate in writing an understanding of the connection between the reflection and theory.

This guide explores how to develop your reflective thinking. It includes advice on:

- The benefits of reflective thinking
- The reflective learning cycle
- Developing your reflective insights

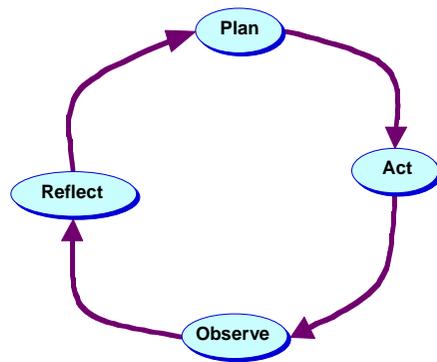
## Benefits of reflective thinking

Reflective thinking is essential for success in unpredictable and complex situations such as working with customers or clients.

Reflective thinking helps you to:

- Develop a questioning attitude and new perspectives
- Identify areas for change and improvement
- Respond effectively to new challenges
- Generalise and apply what you have learned from one situation to other situations

# The reflective learning cycle



This cycle is iterative, so it doesn't stop after one rotation; you apply what you learn, then continue to reflect and develop further.

## Plan

Based on the wider context, theory, models of knowledge and practice, previous experience etc. think carefully about how others have performed similar tasks and use this understanding to develop, modify, change, adapt, and then formulate an action plan for the situation you are expecting to encounter.

## Act

Apply the method or approaches developed in the Plan, with a client or situation. Maintain self awareness. Be prepared to creatively adapt and change goals as you go along - while keeping your plan in mind.

## Observe

As soon as possible, review the session and your observations of what happened, the effects on the client or situation and on yourself. Produce an accurate and objective description of the event.

## Reflect

Reflect upon and evaluate the session and your actions. Analyse your own experience of what you did and how you did it. Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your actions, identify problems and issues for investigation, develop your insight. There is no correct answer and some things may remain difficult to interpret. Did you achieve your

plan? Did your goals change? How did your actions affect the situation and how did the situation affect you? How do your observations fit with the theories you have read?

## Plan again...

Formulate a new action plan based on your experience in the previous situation or session with the client. Use the outcomes of your reflection, rethinking and reinterpreting. Include the wider context of theory, models of knowledge and practice.

## Act again....

# Developing your reflective insights

Be prepared to:

- Stand back from the events and try to be objective
- Be critical of your own actions
- Think of alternative explanations of events
- Make use of evidence from a range of sources e.g. theories
- Recognise that your own point of view will change with time
- Discuss with others to deepen your insight and explore a range of perspectives

## Reflective questions to ask yourself

- Why did I respond in this way?
- What was I thinking and feeling - did this influence me, and why?
- What was the client thinking and feeling, what is the evidence for this?
- What else could I have done?
- What would I do in a similar situation?
- How does my experience compare to what I have read? Are there any theories that would help explain what happened?
- What might be the results of doing things differently? What evidence is there to show things might change if done differently?
- How has the experience changed my understanding?