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Reflective Practice and Action Learning in Youth Work

[Miriam Teuma](#) [1]

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Plato famously maintained that Socrates said that the unreflective life is not worth living. Less famously perhaps, William James remarked that while this was perfectly true, it was also true that the un-lived life wasn't worth reflecting on.

Both responses are apt when we consider such concepts as reflective practice and action learning in the youth field. Reflective practice and action learning have gathered momentum in recent years in such fields as teaching practice but remain relatively underdeveloped in youth work practice. The following discussion seeks to raise awareness of the potential of reflective practice and action learning as tools in promoting and further developing effective youth work practice.

First however, we need to be mindful of some of the pitfalls commonly associated with the very concept of reflection. For instance, is it possible to think back to situations objectively or is it retrospective reality which in hindsight loses some of its accuracy? Is it possible to be honest and consistent in thinking back on such events

without colouring or clouding them? Can we critically and objectively self-examine our own attitudes and behaviours? Is reflective practice merely "rhetoric" or is practice in any field really affected by

reflecting on it? There are however a number of approaches and strategies that have emerged in recent decades that seek to address and minimise the pitfalls associated with reflection and make it relevant for ongoing action and practice. Consequently, can practitioners in youth work be provided with the right tools for reflective practice and action learning? These approaches and strategies highlight a number of key factors, both objective and subjective. First, there is the need to try and objectify experience, to try and see the actual experience from the outside and understand it in that context. Second, there is the need to be honest and forthright in recording our own feelings and thoughts on the experience regardless of our own attitudes and behaviours. Third, we need specific tools for questioning and analysing the experience.

While critical reflection can be described as an attitude and a reasoning process involving many intellectual skills with rationality at its core, it also involves essentially subjective characteristics such as independence, courage, empathy, integrity and perseverance. However in meeting all these concerns, reflection it has been argued, without action, is merely an intellectual exercise. The key questions confronting all practitioners, including those in the youth field, are:

Does reflection really lead to action or are we merely verbalising a theory?

One of the responses to these challenging questions is Action Learning which has been described as “an educational strategy, used in a group setting, that seeks to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of real-time (not simulated) work problems”.

At its simplest, Action Learning alternates doing and reflection. The doing leads to the outcomes. The reflection allows the doing to be more coherent and focused, and the learning that comes from the doing to be more conscious and effective.

Doing and critical reflection are not activities separated in time but rather interwoven and spontaneous activities - what am I doing here and now in this activity? What would I like to change?

Reflection and evaluation are not the same thing. reflection is subjective and spontaneous; it is both intellectual and emotional; it is deeply personal and involves our own particular experiences and the consequent learning resulting from reflection impacts on all these. Evaluation on the other hand is objective, empirical and planned; quantitative and qualitative, analytical and synthesising.

How many of the following applies to the experience you have just reflected on or analysed?

Awareness

- How much attention did you give to what happened?
- How much did you think about it afterwards?
- What methods did you use to think about and record the experience?
- What feedback did you get on from other participants on your perceptions, attitudes and behaviour?

Acceptance

- Did you accept the nature of the experience and will you act on it as a result?

Action

- What did you learn from the experience?
- How will this learning affect future learning experiences?

Reflection consists of those processes in which we engage to recapture, notice and re-evaluate our experience to turn it into learning (Boud et al. 1985:36). It is a cognitive process and open perspective that involves a deliberate pause to examine beliefs, goals or practices in order to gain new or deeper understanding that leads to actions thus improving our practices and building up knowledge in our minds.

Reflective practice is an in-depth conversation about what we do, how it works, and why we do, that it enables us to actively participate in community situations and experience. It is used to look back, and to look forward. It is used to examine what happened during the doing, and then to use this to work out what to do next. In between these two elements, you build theory — conscious understanding — from the experience:

- What happened?
- What have I learned?
- How will I make use of what I have learned?

In reflecting on actual experiences of youth work, regardless of the nature of these experiences, practitioners in the field can employ the tools of reflective practice and action learning as outlined above. In conclusion, a useful cue or note card for youth work practitioners in the field might appear as follows:

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