Reflections on practice: Thoughts on professional development

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ABSTRACT

We are all professionals in a knowledge economy. We should be, anyway, or we'll struggle to remain relevant in an increasingly technological age where information is available everywhere and what makes a difference is how you find and apply it. If you want to do that well you must make the time and get better at reflective practice.

1. Introduction

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. — George Santayana

If you want to read about reflective practice a good place to start is the Wikipedia article on the topic. With over 70 references and a comprehensive review of the main theories, you get a feel for how people have thought about reflective practice over the decades.

Once you've read the article, however, what happens next? Do you follow one of the six or so models in the article or create your own adapted version. Which one is going to work and how should you proceed?

The answer to that question is unclear and so this paper will address another question. Can Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) help us with this?

2. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

I'm not going to explain SSM right now — that would take too long. I'll either point to another paper or fill in this section at another time. For now, just trust me when I say that SSM is a way to approach problematic situations and improve the way in which we think our way to actions that can help improve the situation.

3. The problematic situation of reflective practice

There is a point of view that underpins any discussion on reflective practice — a point of view that suggests reflecting on what you do is a good thing and makes you a better professional. As a result your customers, the people who experience the results of your work, get a better service.

The process of reflection involves your own lived experience, but also takes in the experience of colleagues, other learners and the material you read in books, written by researchers, philosophers and thinkers.

If you accept that reflecting on what has happened with a view to improving what happens in the future is a useful thing then the things that will get in your way are first, yourself and next, other people and situations. If you're too busy to do anything or the people around you would rather you got on with working in whatever way you are already working then you might struggle to get the time to reflect. The constraints on you come down to time and resources to build this kind of activity into your life.

4. Creating a model of reflection

The models out there do a good job of telling you **what to do** but that's also where a problem comes up. How do you know which way is the right way, which is better? Should you follow Borton's 1970 approach of asking what, so what and what next? Or should you look at Brookfield's 1998 concept of many lenses, including your own autobiography and that of other learners, colleagues and published theory?

Some people might pick one approach and try and get that accepted. Its easy to imagine any one of those models being turned into a prescription, something that must be followed exactly and where people who profess to understand one of the models better than you do stand ready to mark, correct and comment on your approach.

Other approaches, like the one taken in the Wikipedia article, critically review the literature and list all the approaches and their pros and cons but at the end you're left feeling a little empty because you're still not sure what to do next.

An SSM approach is helpful at this point because what you can do is create a conceptual model of everything you've learned so far. This model can help you make sense of the thoughts in your head and help you move forward. If you're lucky it may also help someone else in the future.

5. A conceptual model of reflective practice

The figure below is a first pass at an SSM conceptual model that tries to integrate the ideas in the six or so models that you come across in the Wikipedia article on reflective practice.
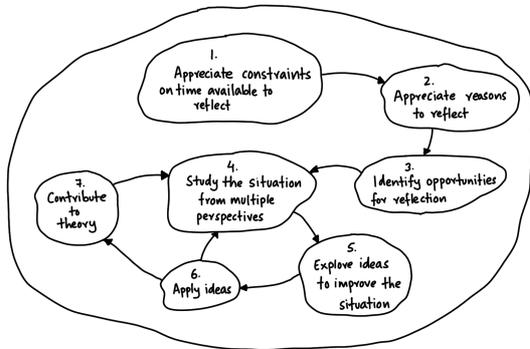
There are seven elements to it.

1. Appreciate constraints on time available to reflect
2. Appreciate reasons to reflect
3. Identify opportunities for reflection
4. Study the situation from multiple perspectives
5. Explore ideas to improve the situation
6. Apply ideas
7. Contribute to theory

These steps are one way to think about what's involved in reflective practice, both in terms of discrete work packages and the relationships and order of work that needs to be done. In addition, as the conceptual model shows, the process is not linear. In fact, it's never-ending as after one pass through a work package we loop back reflect on a previous or related stage. The next question, however, is how we can use this conceptual model to question reality as we see it?

6. Using the conceptual model to question reality

Step 1: Appreciate constraints on the time available to reflect on practice.

The fact is that spending time reflecting is not easy and may not be considered useful or productive work bu the people around you. For example, despite the fairly obvious idea that people doing knowledge work need blocks of uninterrupted time to make meaningful progress many organisations pack people into open plan, noisy offices. Organisation layouts reflect less of a desire to make it easier for people do good work, instead focusing on making it easier for managers to watch and supervise what you do. The other issue is that reflecting on what's happened is like shining a powerful torch into a dark corner. You may not like what you find and others, perhaps powerful others, may be worried by what you think and say will mean for them.

In such situations taking a few minutes or half an hour to push your chair back and daydream may give the wrong impression and do more harm to your career prospects than getting on and doing the job badly the way it's being done right now. So why bother, after all?

Step 2: Appreciate the need to reflect

The reason for reflecting on how you do things, despite the constraints on your situation have to do with the effects it has on you as a professional and the clients who benefit from what you do. You have to believe that it's going to make you better at what you do and that, despite the constraints, you need to find a way to do what needs to be done. You may be lucky and work in a place that gives you an office with a door and trusts you to get the job done but even if that's not the case you need to figure out a way that works for you.

Step 3: Identify opportunities to reflect

When we look hard at how our days go by it's usually possible to find a few minutes for reflective practice. For example, I'm writing these words sat on a bench waiting for my children to finish a sports class. The thing is that a few minutes is rarely enough to really get into the process and feel like it's doing anything and ideally you'll be able to carve out a block of time that you can use. For example, I try and write most evenings after the kids are asleep and the day's

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commitments are over. It can be a pain but because I think it's important to me and worth doing I've done it for enough time to make it a habit. The fact is that it won't just happen — the motivation you get from appreciating the benefits of reflective practice need be enough to drive you to identify opportunities when you can reflect. If you don't, nothing will happen. That's right, absolutely nothing. No consequences, no punishment and no congratulations. There is no reason to do any of this unless you really want to.

Step 4: Study the situation from multiple perspectives

It's only after you've experienced 1, 2 and 3 that you actually get down to the business of reflecting. This is when all the models in the Wikipedia article come into their own — when you start to think about learning loops and checklists and multiple perspectives. This is the point at which you look back at your lived experience and look for what went well, what went badly and what you could do differently. This is the point at which you draw on mentors, whether real or made up of an imaginary mastermind group that you call on for advice. Now is the time for technique, for the application of models and processes.

How you spend this time is up to you, whether you follow one model or engage in divergent and convergent thinking, exploring ideas in many directions and them trimming and pruning routes to select ones that seem interesting and promising. But then what happens next?

Step 5: Explore ideas to improve the situation

After all this time spent thinking you probably have some ideas on what you could do differently. You don't know if they will work but you do know they are worth trying. So that's what happens next.

Step 6: Apply ideas

Now you need to try things out, make small changes or big ones for that matter. For example, you might do something trivial like writing a list of what you're going to do tomorrow at the end of today. Or you might make a big change like moving to home working so you have control over your space and day or change jobs for one that pays less but gives you an office to work in.

Once you've done that it's back to Step 4, where you study the new situation and go back through the loop again. This is a never-ending journey as you think and act and learn. But that's not where you should stop.

Step 7: Contribute to theory

As you go through this process and learn more about your own work and how to do work you'll come up with theory — collections of ideas that explain what you see. The theory that already exists has informed your study of the situation but theory, like anything that sits still, stagnates over time. What you learn is worth pulling together and contributing to the body of knowledge that exists out there. The body of knowledge that you draw on and then start to contribute to. That's probably when real learning starts, when you move from applying theory to your own situation where you share what you think with other. The fact is that you learn more when you try and explain what you think or when you try and teach others than when you sit and think in a dark corner all by yourself.

7. Conclusion

So, there you go. This application of SSM approaches the problematic situation of reflective practice, explores the problem space and what's involved and creates a conceptual model that you can use to ask questions of the situation you're in.

SSM is not a way of how to do something or a way that tells you why to do something. It is, instead, a way to improve the way you think about something. It is "a rigorous approach to the subjective", and that makes it a good way to approach many of the problematic situations we face in life, both in our personal lives and our work with organisations. For me, it is a way to help you create a better life.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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