

Building reflective capability to enhance coaching practice

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The ability to reflect on our work is increasingly recognised as a vital competence of skilled professional practice. However, reflection is a concept that has proved difficult to define and operationalise which can hamper the ability to devise effective means of enhancing this capability. This article examines the concept of reflection, reviews some of the literature which seeks to inform our understanding of reflective practice, and provides an illustration of its use in coaching research and practice. The article concludes with some recommendations for coaches and coaching psychologists who wish to develop their skills as reflective practitioners.

Keywords: Reflection; reflective practice; reflection-in-action; reflection-on-action; coaching; formulation.

Introduction

TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE, while vital to learning and development, is insufficient for preparing individuals for the realities of professional practice. An additional, more experientially-based, form of knowledge is required if professional practice is to prove responsive to individual client need, deliver procedural expertise, and demonstrate more than the mechanical application of tools and techniques. At the heart of this experientially-based form of learning and development lie skills in reflection.

The capacity to reflect on one's work is widely seen as a fundamental component of effective professional practice (see for example, the British Psychological Society's *Standards Framework for Coaching Psychology*, 2008). Nonetheless as a concept, reflection has proved elusive to define and operationalise. A further issue is that the term has been interpreted in diverse ways, as reflection is both a skill and an orientation to one's work (Harper, 2009). This poses challenges for coaching practitioners who wish to find a systematic and effective way of building greater reflective capability into their work. The aims of this article are, therefore, threefold:

1. To enable readers to better understand the nature of reflective practice, and how it can enhance their professional offering to coaching clients;
2. To enable readers to consider how they might use reflection to review and evaluate their practice;
3. To offer some specific methods for enhancing reflective capability that can be applied to current and future learning.

Towards an understanding of reflective practice: Origins, theories and relevance to today's complex world

Since the publication of his seminal text in 1983, Donald Schön's work on the reflective practitioner (see also Schön, 1987) has gained widespread endorsement and provided the inspiration for broadening understanding of how professional practitioners acquire their knowledge and skill. In consequence, developing skills in reflective practice is now an aim of many disciplines within higher education and Schön's work has been incorporated into a variety of professional training programmes including nursing (Hargreaves, 1997), adult education (Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998), counselling

and psychotherapy (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009), and sports coaching (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001).

Reflective practice refers to, '...a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes' (York-Barr et al., 2001; p.6). The purpose of this pause is to enable practitioners to examine their beliefs, assumptions, goals and methods in order to gain insights that might facilitate improved learning (York-Barr et al., 2001). Drawing on the earlier work of Argyris and Schön (1978), Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) have identified a further function of reflection – namely, helping practitioners become sensitive to, and take steps to resolve, any discrepancies between their espoused theories (that is, their stated beliefs and values about learning, development and practice) and their theories-in-use (what they actually 'do' and the results of their actions).

Perhaps because of these perceived functions, reflection has been particularly emphasised in disciplines that require an integration of academic study and practical application. It is also recognised as a quintessential component of the lifelong learning that an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable employment market necessitates (Lane & Corrie, 2006). Unsurprisingly then, the capacity for reflection has been identified as a critical skill in both coaching and coaching psychology (e.g. Grant, 2016; Hay, 2007; McGonagill, 2002). However, reflective practice can mean different things in different contexts. Wellington and Austin (1996) have identified five distinct orientations which are predicated upon divergent beliefs and values and which influence the extent to which reflective practice is used as well as its outcomes:

1. The immediate: an orientation focused exclusively on achieving the task at hand. Practitioners with this orientation rarely use reflective practice;
2. The technical: reflection is seen as a tool for directing practice often within predetermined standards or guidelines;

3. The deliberative: emphasising the discovery of personal meaning, and the attitudes and values of learners;
4. The dialectic: an orientation which rejects authorised discourses around knowledge and its parameters in favour of political and social awareness and activism;
5. The transpersonal: an orientation which seeks to develop the inner self and the relationship between the internal and external world for the purposes of personal liberation.

These orientations are offered not as competing perspectives but rather as different ways in which reflective practice can be approached, with an invitation to practitioners to recognise their own favoured orientations as well as appreciate those of others.

Regardless of the orientation adopted, there is some consensus that reflective practice refers to how insights and understandings can be gained from learning through experience (Boud et al., 1985; Mezirow, 1981). This in turn relies upon the practitioner being both self-aware and able to critically evaluate their decisions and reactions in practice-based contexts. This process of learning from experience can be better understood through considering Schön's (1983) original distinction between *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action refers to an internalised, often intuitive form of knowledge that is acquired over time. It is equated with the notion of 'thinking on our feet' and for Schön, is often triggered in the context of being surprised (e.g. where a client responds to an intervention in a way that the coach did not predict). A consistent feature of effective practice, this enables the practitioner to go beyond the rote application of models or techniques in order to practise with greater artistry and to devise novel, bespoke solutions for the needs of individual clients.

Nonetheless, if the learning acquired through reflection-in-action is to be made available for future practice, it must be

subjected to a more deliberate and conscious process of review and consolidation. This is the essence of 'reflection-on-action'. As Grant (2016) suggests, this type of reflective activity transcends an examination of outcomes and assumes, '...an attitude of holistic curiosity, questioning one's own assumptions, values, frames of reference, theoretical understanding and personal emotional responses' (p.50). This process of reviewing practice after it has occurred is understood by many scholars as primarily an analytical process (see Merriam et al., 2007) that facilitates new perspectives which can inform behavioural change. The ongoing commitment to consciously revisiting our experiences, examining them, choosing what to do differently and then acting accordingly allows for a process of continuous learning and growth. This cyclical process has been captured most famously by Kolb (1984) as well as those who have adapted it (e.g. Gibbs, 1988; and Boud et al., 1985, who have emphasised the need to include our affective responses within the reflective process). These experiential learning models are one approach through which reflective capability can be taught and developed (see for example, Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) which has been applied in healthcare education and offers an approach to structuring reflective learning).

In their work on developing an understanding of reflection in the context of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), Haarhoff and Thwaites (2016) have identified and differentiated four uses of the term:

1. Reflective *practice*: that is, the act of reflecting on practice-based experience including the personal reactions of the practitioner. This may occur in the context of supervision, self-supervision and through use of reflective diaries;
2. Reflective *skill*: that is, the ability to reconstruct events in one's mind, including exploration of one's own reactions and behaviours;
3. Reflection as a *process*: comprising the three elements of focused attention on a specific issue, reconstructing the event,

and conceptualising and synthesising the dilemma through self-analysis and problem-solving;

4. The reflective *system*: that is, the 'engine' which lies at the heart of the practitioner's knowledge and skill and which enables the therapist to adapt their expertise to the needs of the individual client.

The reflective system features centrally in the Declarative Procedural Reflective model originally devised by Bennett-Levy (2006) to better understand and support the development of a wide range of skills in CBT therapists. In brief, he distinguishes *declarative knowledge* (that which is obtained through traditional methods of learning such as reading and attending lectures); *procedural knowledge* (the ability to draw upon an increasingly sophisticated network of tacit 'rules' that guide a practitioner's moment-to-moment decision-making) and the *reflective system* (which contains no discipline-specific knowledge of its own but which drives the process of learning through integrating understanding derived from the other systems). Haarhoff and Thwaites (2016) emphasise that the relationship between the reflective system and the declarative and procedural systems is a two-way process and highlight how the process of reflection may differ as a function of experience. For example, novice practitioners will have relatively limited declarative and procedural knowledge and so the reflective system will be primarily needed to support the development of discipline-specific knowledge and skill. In contrast, for more experienced practitioners, prior knowledge and skills will both shape, and be shaped by, the reflective system in the refinement of expertise (Bennett-Levy, 2006).

Being able to reflect in, and on, action is necessary because, beyond the safety of the structured learning environment, practitioners are inevitably confronted with varying degrees of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity which they must be able to navigate. This more 'messy' reality is a defining feature of professional practice in

which the problems encountered typically defy the clear, neat application of theory and evidence. As Schön observed:

In the varied topography of professional practice there is a high ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest interest (1983, p.42).

If reflective practice supports the ability to navigate the messiness that characterises problems in the 'real world', then there has never been a time when reflection is more essential for coaching practitioners to include amongst their armoury of skills. Arguably, professional practice today requires a greater ability to manage complexity than ever before. Coaches and their clients are living and working in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (Barber, 1992). Many coaching assignments now take place in contexts where single models have limited benefit and linear ways of thinking about cause and effect do not apply. In such contexts, coaching practitioners are having to develop new ways of conceptualising the issues with which their clients present, and acquire new means of defining, delivering and enabling the process of change. Consequently, developing approaches for working with complexity has been an increasing focus of the coaching literature (see Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Kovacs, 2016).

Being reflective about the reflective practice: The limits of the evidence-base

Despite wide endorsement, the notion of reflective practice is not without its critics (see Usher et al., 1987), or its challenges.

Although widely endorsed as an essential component of effective professional practice, there is little rigorous research that has directly linked the benefits of reflective practice to improved outcomes for clients. There is some evidence which supports the benefits to professionals such as gaining insights into practice, growing self-awareness and changing perspectives on issues (Morrison 1996), but as Loughran (2000; cited in Finlay, 2008) has observed, the appeal of reflection may lie in its intuitive 'fit' with our collective assumptions about what underpins skilled professional practice, rather than what has been empirically substantiated.

An alternative explanation for the apparent lack of evidence for reflective practice, and as noted at the beginning of this article, is that the phenomenon itself does, to an extent, defy definition. It does not, therefore, lend itself well to operationalisation and measurement. Reflection is perhaps best understood as a 'meta-competence' and as such, its impact on practice may occur through a series of indirect meta-effects rather than through any simple causal chain that can be readily identified and replicated. Where this is overlooked, unintended consequences may arise. For example, Finlay (2008) has highlighted how reflective practice has sometimes been adopted in an attempt to rationalise existing practice – an example of reflective practice being used in a distinctly unreflective way. Equally, experiential learning models, whilst having benefits for the teaching and development of reflective practice may, if applied too rigidly, result in a mechanistic application that leaves little scope for practitioners to develop their own context-dependent approaches (Quinn, 2000).

There are also challenges at the level of engagement. For some, reflective practice can be difficult and unsettling. In teacher training, for example, many student teachers found the process painful as they gained awareness of their lack of expertise and of the complexity of the issues they were exploring (Morrison, 1996). In the field of

nursing, practitioners may feel they have 'lost their way' as their existing assumptions and knowledge are challenged (Brookfield, 1993). These examples highlight that reflective practice needs to be dovetailed to the needs, experience and readiness of the individual. For coaching practitioners who are at an early stage of their career and professional development journey, it may be most appropriate to develop their reflective capacity in the supportive environment of learning groups or supervision rather than through individual reflection activities.

A further challenge to embedding reflection in practice is both a physiological and psychological one. Reflection entails an active and conscious processing of thoughts and reactions, which requires self-control, energy and the right conditions (Arnsten, 2009). Some of the difficulty in creating space to think in today's world of information-overload is driven by our neurochemistry. A highly task-focused orientation, switching between tasks and multi-tasking, produce dopamine which can engender a feeling of personal productivity whilst actually depleting effectiveness (Crabbe, 2014). For example, multi-tasking has been noted to increase by 40 per cent the amount of time needed to complete tasks (Meyer & Kieras, 1997). In contrast, although the time spent in reflective activities may well lead to more significant outcomes it is less likely to be accompanied by a release of dopamine and may, therefore, feel less satisfying.

How, then, should we as coaching practitioners respond to the call to be reflective, whilst at the same time acknowledging the limitations of the current evidence-base? In the next section, we present a case study which provides an illustration of how reflective practice was used as a 'backbone' to a substantial piece of coaching research. This provides a basis for the final section in which we offer some specific recommendations for coaching practitioners who seek to develop their own reflective capability.

Building reflective capability:

A case study

For one of us (LK), the development of reflective capability became an essential component of her doctoral research as well as her coaching practice. The research project involved developing, implementing and evaluating a framework that applied case formulation to executive coaching. Reflective capability was required for the researcher (who also delivered the coaching to all the research participants) to investigate and evaluate the complexities entailed in the application of the framework to coaching practice. A secondary aim of the research was to understand the coach's developmental experience, identify the mechanisms for any development and use these data to make recommendations to other coaching psychologists for their professional development.

Several methods of reflection were employed during the study, which were based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework and used reflective questions adapted from Fook and Gardener (2006; see Table 1). The researcher's reflections on coaching sessions were used as a distinct method of data collection and entailed recording each session, reviewing the recordings, and writing reflections on the session. A written learning journal was also maintained throughout the project. This was used for capturing and synthesising information, ideas and knowledge, and reflecting on their application to coaching practice. Reflections in the journal also identified themes and patterns emerging from both the session reflections and the learning journal itself. In addition, formulation is an inherently reflective practice. Developing formulations for each of the coaching clients both required and assisted in developing reflective capability, synthesising information, developing hypotheses, making links between data, and reflecting on the progress of the coaching.

One pattern that emerged from the data analysis of the learning journal was a change in the nature of the reflections over the period of the research. Early in the research many

of the entries took the form of reflections on practice, such as reviewing the coaching techniques used, what went well and what might be more effective. As the research progressed, the reflections became increasingly focused on the researcher's professional and personal selves. For example, after one session the researcher reflected on the anger she felt on behalf of her client. The journal entry for this incident considered what had triggered this response in the researcher, and these reflections helped her identify how a perceived transgression of values, a challenge to assumptions and beliefs about how people in the workplace should behave, and a difference in cultural norms led to her reaction.

In reviewing the data from this case study, reflective practices were identified as one of the primary mechanisms of coach development. The discipline of maintaining a commitment to reflective practices for the duration of the doctorate led to several key outcomes. First, the regular practice of reflection-on-action increased the researcher's ability to reflect-in-action. The learning journal entries captured the increasing awareness of emotions and reactions and how these were managed or used in sessions. Second, the development and ongoing use of the PAIR (purpose-account-intervene-reflect) framework (Kovacs, 2016) enabled reflective practice through applying formulation and a process of post-session reflection. Experiencing the benefits to personal and professional development of a sustained commitment to reflection created a habit that is now embedded in the researcher's professional practice.

How to promote reflective practice: Some recommendations

As noted previously, understanding of 'reflective practice' can vary considerably as a function of both intellectual orientation and discipline-specific considerations (Finlay, 2008). Arguably, the field of coaching is yet to determine its own definition of this complex phenomenon or to determine its position on how reflection might enable best prac-

tice for our clients. In the absence of clear guidance, we offer some recommendations emerging from practice-based evidence that might represent an aid to decision-making for the individual practitioner. As illustrated by the case study, bringing reflective practice into the heart of coaching requires sustained effort. Therefore, before embarking on this endeavour it is important to be clear about what you want reflection to contribute to your work. Is your primary concern developing greater understanding of your work with a specific client, or are you seeking to embed a learning process that will support your work over time? Are you seeking a cross-sectional perspective that will increase your insight into what happened in a specific session, or wanting to develop a reflective 'habit' that will help sustain you through a period of study? Are you primarily concerned with self-reflection, general reflective skills, reflection-on-action or reflection-in-action? These outcomes cannot all be achieved at the same time although, as with the case study above, a focus on one area may build reflective capacity more broadly.

With clarity of purpose established, consideration can be given to identifying the most appropriate tools, approaches and forms of support to achieve this purpose and that are best suited to your preferences. Reflection does not have to be a written or introspective process but can take the form of reflection with others, such as in supervision or peer practice groups. Reflections can be captured using audio or video recordings, drawing mind-maps or through creating illustrations.

Regardless of the method used, one of the core elements of reflective practice is the use of incisive questions, which may be used in conjunction with a model of reflection such as Gibbs (1988) or Kolb (1984). Table 1 provides some examples of questions (adapted from Fook & Gardner, 2006) that may be useful starting points in different situations and which we offer to the reader in the hope that they might facilitate a personalised approach.

Table 1: Questions to support the development of reflective practice.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection-on-practice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What worked well? What does working well mean in this context? ○ What was not as effective? What does not effective mean in this context? ○ What do my responses to the questions above reveal about the hypotheses I hold about the client and their situation? ○ What would I do differently next time?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In building capability for reflection-in-action, it can be helpful to listen to recordings of sessions. This provides an opportunity to re-live the session and consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What did I miss, or was not considering, in the moment? ○ What was going through my mind and what did that lead to? ○ What was my line of enquiry? ○ What hypotheses was I holding in mind and how did I go about testing these? ○ What could I have done differently and in what way might that have changed the conversation?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In building capability for reflection-on-action, some questions to hold in mind include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is the pattern here? What might this pattern mean? ○ How does this interaction make me feel and what might that mean? ○ How are my emotions, beliefs or assumptions influencing my ability to work with the client at this point? ○ What hypotheses am I forming and how can I test these?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For developing the ability for greater self-reflection: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What does this situation or case tell me about my values and assumptions? ○ What different assumptions or beliefs would help me act differently next time? What would be the potential impact on the client? ○ Am I applying the theories in which I am trained or just going with the flow and my gut feel? What are the implications of this? ○ How did my beliefs and assumptions interact with the social context in this situation? What impact did this have on the coaching and the client?

While incisive questions are a useful tool, additional approaches can be applied that can help embed and sustain reflective practice. These include:

- Introducing a discipline of reflecting on each session. Both successes and disappointments in coaching interactions and outcomes can be useful sources of reflective material revealing patterns that lead to insights for clients, and the coach's professional and personal development (Kovacs 2016).
- Recording sessions over a period of time, or intermittently with different clients. These recordings can be used for personal review alone, or shared in supervision (Carson 2008).
- Keeping a reflective diary (written, spoken or video) that you review periodically to identify and capture themes across your work (Thorpe 2004, Hay, 2007).
- Use of peer supervision or a critical friend (Gilbert & Trudel 2001, and see McNicoll & Baker, 2012, for examples of tools that can be used for supervision and mentoring groups).
- Note-taking in sessions (see Grant, 2016). This can support reflection-in-action given that not only is key information noted but the coach's thoughts and reflections on the client and the session content are also captured.
- Developing formulations, which assist in synthesising data, developing hypotheses,

seeing links, and bringing new perspectives to a client's situation (Kovacs 2016).

It may take some experimentation and practice before you strike the right approach for your purpose and preferences. Moreover, as illustrated by the case study above, it is useful to periodically review and evaluate your reflective practices, which aids in embedding reflection in your work at multiple levels, including on the effectiveness of your current reflective practices.

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this article to critically review the literature on reflective practice in its entirety. Nonetheless, by identifying some of the main contributions to this literature, the aim has been to sharpen understanding of reflective practice and to consider how its more conscious application might support our work as coaching practitioners. Ultimately, reflection is only one of myriad reasoning skills needed for professional practice. However, as Ghaye (2000) observes, 'Maybe reflective practices offer us a way of trying to make sense of the uncertainty in our workplaces and the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos...' (p.7). Reflective practice, it would seem, has much to teach us, if we are willing to invest the time and energy in reaping the benefits it has to offer.

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Reflective practice has become a focus of interest and a powerful movement in teacher education. The complexity of teaching requires teachers to question their practices for their own professional development in order to improve and to increase learner performance. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on an action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning. Reflective practice is used at both the pre-service and in-service levels of teaching. Coaching and peer involvement are two aspects of reflective practices seen most often at the pre-service level. In a 1993 study on how student teachers develop the skills necessary for reflective teaching during their field experiences, Ojanen explores the role of the teacher educator as a coach. Lifeworld-based reflection and learning: a contribution to the reflective practice in nursing and nursing education. *Reflective Practice*, [online] 8(3), pp.331-343. Available at: [Accessed 20 April 2019]. Building reflective capability to enhance coaching practice. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 13(1), pp.4-12. Journal. Mann, S. and Walsh, S. *Emotional Intelligence Coaching: Improving Performance for Leaders, Coaches and the Individual* by Steven Neale, Lisa Spencer-Arnell, and Liz Wilson (Amazon). *Simple Habits for Complex Times: Powerful Practices for Leaders* by Jennifer Garvey Berger and Keith Johnston (Amazon). *Trillion Dollar Coach: The Leadership Playbook of Silicon Valley's Bill Campbell* by Eric Schmidt, Jonathan Rosenberg, and Alan Eagle (Amazon). Another useful way to enhance your coaching skills would be to target the specific skills that you feel are most relevant to take your practice to the next level. This article about