

From mindless to mindful practice: on learning reflection in supervision

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While there is much literature and research on reflection and reflective practice, there is relatively little to help individuals and small groups learn how to be reflective. Too much depends on reflection for it to be left to chance or the hope that it might be picked up during the journey of life. Rather, it seems wiser to teach or facilitate how to reflect, so that individuals and groups can be assured of having such a precious commodity. MICHAEL CARROLL describes what reflective learning means and considers the elements that support and block being reflective. A model of reflection is offered to help trainers to teach practitioners in reflection and, in particular, how to use reflection in supervision. Suggestions are offered on how we can help others, in this case supervisees, learn how to be more reflective.

'The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.' Henry Miller.

'The man approached the sage and said, 'Oh, Master, I have travelled far and wide to hear the three secrets that I need to know in order to live a full and rich life. Would you tell me those secrets?' The Master bowed in return and said, 'Yes, I will tell you. The first secret is pay attention. The second secret is pay attention, and the third secret is pay attention.' Ray and Myers, 1986, p. 66.

Supervisors facilitate the learning of supervisees. In supervision, supervisees learn, amongst other things, how to move from dependent novice to autonomous practitioner. Supervisors help in that transition (Fielden, 2008). Furthermore, supervisees learn how to use their experience as the springboard for further learning. They become reflective-practitioners developing what Gillmer and Marckus (2003), refer to as *'the capability to reflect critically and systematically on the work-self interface ... fostering a personal awareness and resilience'* (p. 23). How that happens is the focus of this article.

How can we best support supervisees in making their experience their primary teacher and, in doing so, become independent learners?

How can we supervise them using experiential learning where *'they sit at the feet of their own experience'* (Zachary, 2001), becoming students of their own practice? In essence, how do they become mindful practitioners who reflect on their work and learn from that work through reflection? Lewin (1947) called this movement from experience to learning the *'spiral of discovery'*. It has also been referred to as the process of becoming *'retrospectively introspective'* (Ray & Myers, 1986, p. xiv).

Before beginning our journey into critical reflection as the heart blood of experiential learning, and of supervision, a cautionary note needs to be made along the lines outlined by Brockbank and McGill (1998). They write, *'We realise we are using a*

cognitive, analytical and fairly rational means in order to make the explanation as accessible as possible to readers. In the description we may inadvertently convey the idea that once cognitively understood as a concept, then reflective practice is a straightforward and rational process. A cognitive understanding of reflective practice is a step towards what is in practice a complex and more holistic endeavour' (p. 70). Reflection is much more than a cognitive or abstract process—it involves emotions, intuitions, sensations, and bodily experiences that resonate with the heart as well as the head.

Experiential learning

The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) has long been used as a framework for understanding how

learning from experience takes place. Its four elements (doing, reflecting, learning and applying learning) work together to make learning from experience possible. The Experiential learning cycle integrates four ways of knowing:

Tacit knowledge (knowing intuitively)

This form of knowing is the foundation of 'doing' the work. In practicing our work we delve into the

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font of knowledge that we possess and intuitively, hopefully from an 'unconscious competence' perspective, do our job well. Referred to in educational circles as 'automaticity', intuitive knowing is the most effective way of engaging in work. We know automatically and we practice intuitively. The difference between the amateur and the professional, or the beginner and the more experienced practitioner, is this intuitive ability. Beginners think about what they are doing, they watch themselves perform; they hover above themselves rationally deciding their next steps. Experienced practitioners tend not to do that. They dip unconsciously into their pool of tacit knowledge and intuitively know what the best course of action is.

There is some evidence from sports coaching and sports psychology that the more we think about what we are doing when we are actually doing it, the more our performance deteriorates. The time for thinking and reflection is not during the process, but before and after it. 'Just do it' is a sensible injunction to those of us who over-reflect or monitor our actions as we do them. Schon (1983, 1987) calls this 'knowing-in-action' or 'knowing-in-use' (the ability to access our knowledge while behaving) and sees reflection-in-action as the process that allows us to do so.

Reflective knowledge (knowing why)

Experiential learning involves using reflection as a method of learning. Reflection and critical reflective learning involves supervisees in honest consideration and investigation of their work (Mezirow, 2000). Supervisors facilitate this reflection by setting up an environment of inquiry in order to help supervisees learn from their own practice. With open mind and open

Propositional or declarative learning (knowing that)

This form of knowing emerges from critical reflection. Learning is articulated and connected to theory, frameworks, models and other intellectual definitions and descriptions. Learning is captured in words and voices—articulating our learning in propositions and theories focuses our learning.

Practical or procedural knowledge (knowing how)

This form of knowing emerges in the final section of the *Experiential Learning Cycle* in finding ways to translate propositional learning into skills, capabilities, competencies and qualities of the supervisee that enables him or her to return to their work. The application of knowledge is itself a form of knowing as we learn the practice skills of translating our theories into our work.

Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007), in their application of the *Experiential*

heart (Scharmer, 2007), supervisees are transparent, honest, aware and alert to what is happening as they reflect on the procedures, processes and relationships involved.

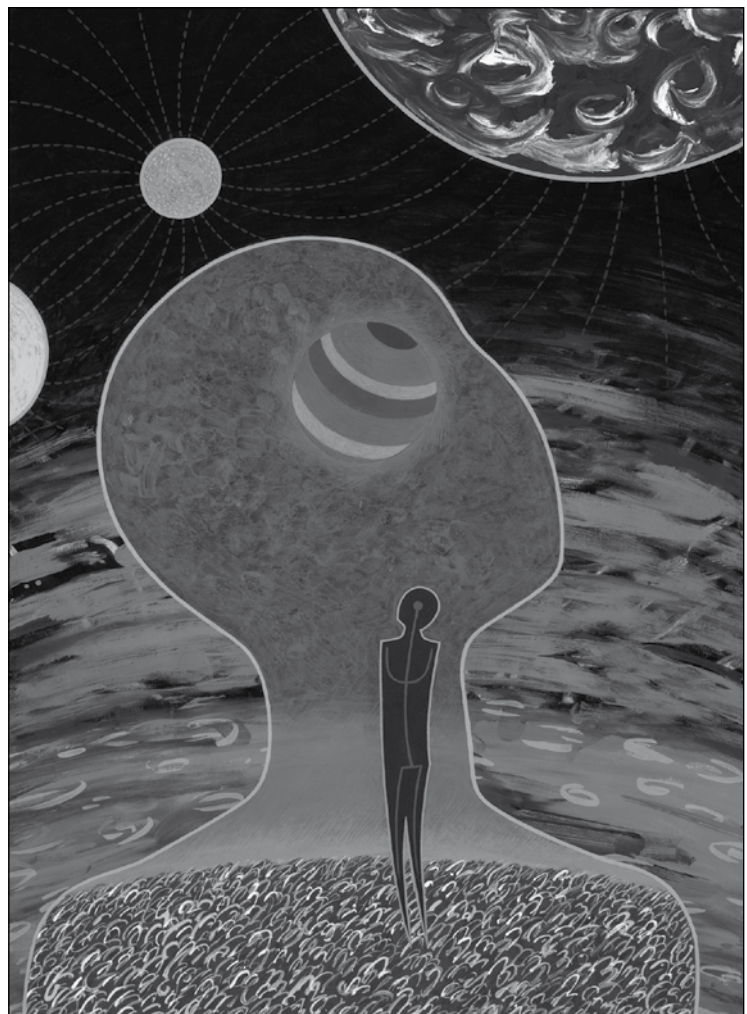


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Learning Cycle to coaching, outline three movements:

a) An internal to external movement. The internal movement involves reflection and conceptualisation of new learning. This, in turn, leads to the second external movement from action/application of learning to new practice.

b) a past, present and future movement; past experience is reflected on in the present and gives rise to new meaning that is then integrated into future work.

c) A 'movement within' that results in changing meaning—the meaning and interpretation of our experience changes as we hold it up to critical examination.

A further movement could be added: from *unconscious competence* (accessing our pool of tacit knowledge), through *conscious incompetence* (allowing ourselves vulnerability as we reflect on our work and translate that vulnerability into new learning), through to applications of new learning to our work. Moore (2009) focuses on the 'emotional knowing' side of this work and presents a model where 'the reflexive, non-shaming learning environment of the process framework is at the service of facilitating firstly self-awareness through reflexivity, secondly other-awareness through empathy and finally therapeutic awareness through reiterative empathy' (p. 7).

The medium of learning in supervision is reflection

The medium of learning in supervision is mainly reflective. While reflective learning shares similar psychological process to other forms of learning (the psychology of learning), it is separate in that it focuses on experience and differs from other forms of learning in the range of processes it goes through. While tradition and theories gather and garner the reflective experiences of others, reflection is a way of learning personally from the events within our own lives.

In this article, a distinction is made between *reflection*—the activity of considering and thinking about what is external to myself e.g., my work, my life, my relationships and so on—and *reflectivity*—the process of reflecting

on the 'I' who is reflecting. The latter looks and focuses on the person doing the reflection. Both are involved in reflective learning.

Reflective learning in the context of learning

As part of the learning process in general, reflective learning shares psychological processes with all forms of learning and, in particular, adult learning. Adult learning has been well-described and defined, and the features and characteristics of adult learning well documented (Jarvis, Holford & Griffin, 1998; Knowles, 1970, Wenger, 1998). A short summary of

not expect children to be very reflective but we have some expectations of adults to lead thought-through lives as emphasised in the famous quote by Socrates—'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

Some of the principles that underpin adult learning and are connected to the ability to reflect at deeper and deeper levels are articulated by Hawkins and Smith (2006, p. 4–6):

1. *'There is always more than one client you serve. This is true even when you are coaching or mentoring an individual executive.'*
2. *All real time learning and development is relational.*

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the key characteristics of learning to contextualise what reflective learning means will be made.

Voller (2009) describes learning as a 'change in behaviour caused by experience' (p. 9). Another definition widens this, 'Learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person's way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualising something in the real world' (Ramsden, 1988, p. 271).

Within learning, different levels can be seen and have been described somewhat differently by different authors. Bateson (1973) talks of three levels of learning—content of learning, different frameworks of learning, and learning about learning. Single, double and treble loop learning are terms used by Argyris and Schon (1972) to describe the journey from learning facts to questioning the assumptions that underpin ways of learning. As learning moves downwards from simple facts, figures and skills (simple knowing and doing) to more complex ways of learning that result in transformational learning (learning that changes the values, mind sets and schema by which we create knowledge), reflection and critical reflection become more important in the process. We do

3. *Robust dialogue that balances challenge and support is essential for relationships to develop and individuals to learn.*
4. *Learning is for life, not just for courses.*
5. *Adult human beings learn best through experience, not by being taught or told. The work of the learning enabler is never to know better and never to know first, but to create the enabling conditions and experiences that create a transformational shift in the relationship and the individual.*
6. *Transformational change becomes systemic when we focus on the shift in the part of the system we are working directly with (individual, team functions etc.) to jointly create the shift that is necessary in the wider system.*
7. *Supervision is essential for the coach, mentor or consultant to remain effective and continue to develop.'*

Several factors emerge when we apply some of these principles to reflection. First of all, learning is not just simply an internal process gone through by individuals alone. Learning is a social event and the relationships and conversations involved have a

mammoth impact on individual and group learning. We can distinguish *internal* and *external* reflection: the former is what happens within an individual when he or she puts themselves into a process of reflection. We cannot doubt the benefits of such reflection—however, internal dialogue alone can allow for self deception and downloading.

Fine (2007) and Smith (2004) show how incredibly self deceptive we can be. Smith (2004) makes the point that humans are ‘*naturally deceptive... spending their lives surrounded by pretence*’ (p.2). In asking how self-deception has become part of human nature, Smith sees it as an evolving concept within relationships. It not only soothes us to hide the truth from ourselves, but also it makes it easier to lie to others. Our way of doing this is to evolve the unconscious mind—in this way we can deceive ourselves and others under the guise that we don’t actually know we are doing it because it is outside of our awareness. Hence his definition: ‘*Self deception is any mental process or behaviour the function of which is to conceal information from one’s conscious mind*’ (p. 21). We humans keep out of our own awareness what we do not want to know. By doing so we deceive ourselves and protect ourselves at the same time. Reflecting on my work then becomes restricted reflection. I do not allow myself to think about the fact that I find this client incredibly attractive. There is no issue for me. There is no thought of what this might mean, or a sense of rightness/wrongness, or professionalism, or ethics, or how it might be affecting the actual work. Avoidance (self-deception) has solved all these issues.

Reflective dialogue is the stuff of supervision and sees learning as taking place within a social context. Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that most learning theory, by focusing primarily on the acquisition of knowledge by individuals, ignores or underplays significantly the essential role of social participation in the learning process (Sloop, 2009). Coining the phrase ‘*communities of practice*’ in 1991, Wenger in a later publication (1998), outlines his principles of learning:

- *‘Learning is inherent in human nature.*
- *Learning is first and foremost the ability to negotiate new meanings.*
- *Learning creates emergent structures.*
- *Learning is fundamentally experiential and fundamentally social.*
- *Learning transforms our identities.*
- *Learning constitutes trajectories of participation.*
- *Learning means dealing with boundaries.*
- *Learning is a matter of social energy and power.*
- *Learning is a matter of engagement.*
- *Learning is a matter of imagination.*
- *Learning is a matter of alignment.*
- *Learning involves an interplay between the local and the global.*
- *Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately, it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning: it moves on its own terms.*
- *Learning cannot be designed: it can only be designed for—that is, facilitated or frustrated.’* (p. 225–229).

From this social perspective, we can envisage supervision being a form of conversation that facilitates learning. Critical reflection allows participants to learn together in dialogue. Isaacs (1999) defines dialogue as a way of ‘*thinking together in relationship*’ and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) extend this idea:

‘In didactic talk, each participant may report experience, but there is no attempt amongst participants to join together to arrive at some new understanding. ‘Really talking’ requires some careful listening; it implies a mutually shared agreement that together you are creating the optimum setting so that half baked ideas can grow. ‘Real talk’ reaches deep into the experience of each participant; it also draws on the analytical abilities of each’ (p. 144).

If supervision can be seen as a mini ‘community of practice’ where dialogue is the form of conversation used and critical reflection allows participants to be open to multiple possibilities, then learning takes place through social participation. Reflective dialogue leads to generative action through transformational learning.

What is reflection?

In general, reflection is the ‘*ability to step back and pose hard questions about: why are things done this way? How could I do it differently?*’.

Voller (2009) defines and describes reflection as, ‘*Purposeful focusing on thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviour in order to make meaning from those fragments of experience. The outcome of this reflection is to create new understanding which in turn may lead to: increasing choices, making changes or reducing confusion*’ (p. 21).

There are several factors involved in understanding what reflection is, what it means and what processes it goes through.

First of all reflection is a human activity, one of those activities we do not seem to share with other animals, either reptiles or mammals. Our language is replete with words and phrases showing our propensity to reflect: ‘*I thought about what you said...I’ll mull it over and we’ll talk tomorrow...what do you think about what he did? Why did you do that? Let me think some more about it...*’

Moon (1999) word associates around the term reflection and comes up with a veritable dictionary of possible substitute words: ‘*reasoning, thinking, reviewing, problem solving, inquiry, reflective judgment, critical reflection...*’ (p. v11). Other animals, while clearly able to learn from experience, do not seem to have that critical facility that allows them delve deeper into their experience in order to manufacture meaning. Gilbert (2006) puts this humorously when he writes, ‘*Until a chimp weeps at the thought of growing old alone, or smiles as it contemplates its summer holidays, or turns down a toffee apple because it looks too fat in shorts... We think about the future in a way no other animal can, does, or ever has, and this simple, ubiquitous, ordinary act is a defining feature of our humanity.*’ (p. 4). Reflection is the ability to think about the past, in the present for the future. Gilbert also points out that we access the future through imagination.

We not only act, but also then think about what we have done; and we can even think about our thinking on what we have done. Reflection can be spiral. Reflection is a crucial element in human learning. Not being able

to reflect means being condemned to repeat actions over and over again, to live out the scripts of others, and to live out received wisdom and learning that is handed to us but has never been owned by us. This is what we mean by mindlessness—without thinking, we live out the same routines over and over again. Reflection is the ability to examine, to observe, to look at, to review, to evaluate, to interrogate, to assess, to question and to own our own thinking.

The actual word '*reflection*' comes from a Latin root meaning '*to bend back, to stand apart from, to stand outside of*'. In reflection, we take a step back and look at what we or others have done. Reflection means stepping back from an experience or event to gain a new perspective on what I have done. With reflection we explore our experiences in order to make sense of them, to examine other ways of making sense of them, and even probe our ways of making sense of them.

The rationale for reflection is the making of meaning, making sense of experience. Meaning making is also a human activity restricted to the frontal cortex part of the brain. One way to articulate this is to consider the difference between developing skills (which we share with other animals), and the ability to develop capability (apply skills across domains through reflecting). The events of our lives become experiences when we reflect on them and these experiences in turn become our ways of making meaning of events.

In the light of the above, reflection has a number of characteristics:

- Reflection is an 'internal' activity. I harness my thoughts and feelings to consider, thinking about what has happened. I go inside to access my capacity to review what I have done or what has happened. Reflection starts with being able to stop doing and begin thinking about what has transpired.
- The purpose of the activity is to hold 'up to the light', to allow it to speak to me so that I can learn from it
- Reflection is a process of examination, inquiry, self-interrogation where I ask

questions of the activity itself. Why did this happen? Why did I do that? Why did that person respond in that way? Why do I keep getting into these situations? Reflection can also ask questions of the person reflecting. Who am I who is reflecting? Why do I reflect this way?

- Reflection is a way of making sense of, and giving meaning to, events and experiences. Reflection gives attention and focus to what we already know in order to achieve further insights that lead to further knowledge. It is a meaning-making facility that helps me understand from a number of perspectives. Widening reflectivity means widening the meaning—making frameworks from which I work.
- Reflection is not just a rational event—it is an emotional experience as well (Moore, 2009; Moon, 2004).
- With reflection, I can then look at alternatives, other ways of thinking or doing, '*Reflection requires linking existing knowledge to an analysis of the relationship between current experience and future action*' (McAlpine & Weston, 2002, p. 69).
- Reflection focuses on processes for which there is no obvious or clear cut solution, no certain knowledge (Moon, 1999). Certainty needs no reflection. King and Kitchener (1994) make the distinction between '*well-structured problems*', which have an answer and often a single answer, and '*ill-structured problems*', which can have a number of possible answers and often no absolute right answer. Reflection is the process of how people reason about ill-structured problems.

Schon (1983, 1987) talks about two types of reflection: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The first type—present tense reflection or the ability to pause in the middle of action—observes and reflects on what we are doing as we are doing it. Bolton (2001) describes this as '*the hawk in your mind constantly circling over your*

head watching and advising on your actions—while you are practicing' (p. 15). Casement (1985) coined the term 'internal supervisor' to capture this type of reflection within the area of psychotherapy. He suggested creating 'an island of intellectual contemplation' (See Henderson (2009) for a review of the internal supervisor). As we engage with our work, we become our own supervisor, monitoring, thinking, evaluating, and assessing what is going on. It is a way to make sense of what is happening as it is happening. The second kind of reflection—recollective reflection—is the more luxurious reflection-on-action where we stop activities and intentionally put ourselves into a stance of curiosity and inquiry. We think backwards using a past experience as the focus of our thinking. We are provided with time, space, safety and attention to focus on and think about our experiences. A third type of reflection is *reflection-for-action*—anticipatory reflection—where we prepare for the future using imagination to think through and evaluate possible scenarios.

Levels of reflection

King and Kitchener (1994) present seven stages of reflection in three overarching categories, a sort of 'developmental theory' of reflection.

Pre-reflective thinking is the first stance

Here knowledge is viewed as absolute and predetermined with no room for other views. There is a right answer. Beliefs and facts are not distinguished. Scharmer (2007) calls this '*zero-thinking*' or '*I-in-me*' thinking where new knowledge is filtered through old certainties and does not change the underlying beliefs. A further step in this category, but still within it, acknowledges other beliefs but sees them as wrong. Authority keeps us right. At this stage there is little or no reflective thinking.

Quasi-reflective thinking is the second overarching step

Quasi-reflective thinking moves on from absolute knowledge to understanding that uncertainty exists i.e., that there are some problems to which we do not have exact solutions or absolute knowledge. We begin to allow ourselves to consider other possibilities.

Scharmer (2007) calls this the *'I-in-you'* stage where there is some ability to consider knowledge from other stances and beliefs.

Reflective thinking is the final stage in the process of reflection

With this stage comes the understanding that knowledge is not a 'given' but must be constructed and is always open to new evaluation and new interpretation. Context and evidence make a difference here. Here individuals take on the role of inquirers—those actively involved in creating and constructing knowledge. Throughout there is movement from *'ignorant certainty'* to *'intelligent confusion'* (Kroll, 1996b quoted in King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 225). Rumi, the

ancient Persian poet, puts it well: *'Sell your certainty and buy bewilderment'*.

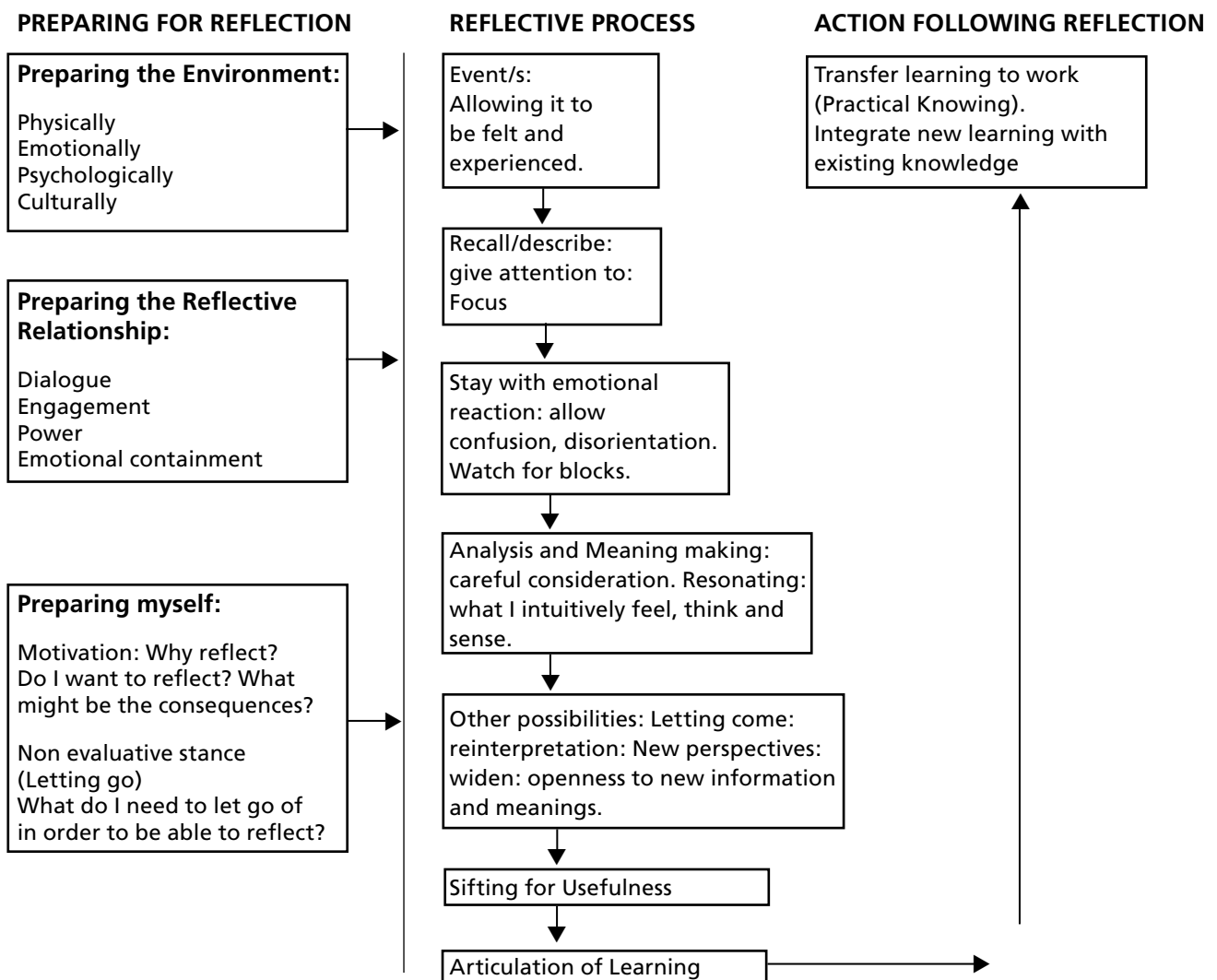
It is possible to connect Kohlberg's (1986) levels of moral reasoning and Kegan's (1994) five orders of consciousness to levels of reflection. Both, from different vantage points, review the movement from *'socially egocentric constructions of the world'* (Kegan, 1994, p. 20) where knowledge is certain, through to more complex and abstract ways of thinking and reasoning that accommodate other minds and other viewpoints. Kegan (1994) connects this to reflection: *'Reflective thinking requires a mental 'place' to stand apart from, or outside of, a durably created idea, thought, fact or description... (it is) yet another expression of what it means to think abstractly'*

(p.27). Reflection moves through stages, somewhat chronologically where knowledge is viewed in more complex ways, where abstraction allows for wider thinking and where there is a realisation that answers are not just given but have to be worked out through this process called reflection.

The process of reflection

A number of areas come together to make reflection possible. The following is intended as an overview and a rigid step-by-step process of reflection as represented in Figure 1. We can use Figure 1 not only as a model for focusing on reflective practice, but also to help us step back and look at the process by which reflection takes place—reflection on reflection (what

Figure 1. Structuring the Reflective Process (Stages of Reflection)



we called earlier reflexivity, looking at the person doing the reflection). The meta-cognition involved here moves from a focus on experience itself to a focus on the experience of reflection in order to review its effectiveness.

We can now look at the stages outlined in Figure 1.

1. Preparing for reflection.

Three factors need to be in place before reflection can take place:

- a) Preparing the environment for reflection: being physically, emotionally, psychologically and culturally prepared for reflection;
- b) Preparing the reflective relationships and the components involved in that relationship, and
- c) preparing myself by reviewing and consolidating my motivation and taking a non-evaluative stance that permits wide reflection.

Clearing a space to help the reflective process is important. Being in the right frame of mind helps enormously. It is here that some of the research on mindfulness can help. Put simply, mindfulness is learning to be fully alert and available in the present moment (Carroll, 2004).

Mindfulness is also a purposeful way of being attentive to internal states of feelings and thoughts as well as external states of the environment (May & O'Donovan, 2007). It helps us remain attentive without judgment. Siegel (2007) recommends silence as one method of setting up mindfulness and reflection, '*silence creates a rare opportunity to pause and drop into stillness, to become intimate with your own mind. When we start the journey to attune our own minds by pausing into stillness we enter a new realm of experience that can produce surprise in each moment*' (p. 72). Siegel also suggests that meditation is a good method for creating stillness and focusing the mind. He quotes Lazar's research concluding that meditation might alter the very structures of our brains that are responsible for empathy and self-observation. Relaxed, alert and focused we are ready to reflect. Creating the best physical environment, preparing myself emotionally, recognising my psychological helps and blocks in setting up an ideal reflective

environment, and being alert to cultural issues, all help me prepare for the process called reflection.

The relationship/s that surround us (the supervisory, counselling or coaching relationship) are a second factor in preparing the reflective ground. How power is used in the relationship, the kind of engagement involved, and the type of conversation used, all contribute to the atmosphere of reflection (or not, as the case may be). How contained we feel emotionally is a further factor in our readiness to allow ourselves the vulnerability of reflection.

The third preparatory factor is the ability to monitor our motivation and get ourselves into a non-judgemental stance. Scharmer (2007) describes the latter well, '*But it is only in the suspension of judgment that we can open ourselves up to wonder. Wonder is about noticing that there is a world beyond our patterns of downloading... without the capacity for wonder, we will most likely remain stuck in the prison of our mental constructs*' (p. 134). The reason why we reflect is equally important and worth articulating for ourselves.

2. Doing reflection.

Ready to reflect, we now turn our focus and attention to experience, in the case of supervision, our work, and begin to immerse ourselves in the remembered events. We allow our work into our minds, we become sensitive to what happened, we observe, notice, take stock of, perceive and look at in detail. Leonardo da Vinci used to send his students to study a fish and draw it. On their return he would tell them to go back and look again. He repeated this process many times based on the principle that there are always new perceptions we have missed or overlooked. This stage in the reflective process could be called, *Attention*. Siegel (2007) divides attention into three parts: *alerting* (involving attention, vigilance and alertness); *orienting* (selecting certain information from a variety of options to scan or select); and thirdly, *executive attention*, which is about our intention to sift and control the process. We recollect and describe and tell the story: What happened? Describe the event. Don't evaluate it. Remember it. Perceive it again, and again. Look at it anew. What are you missing, what are

you not seeing? Huston (2007) connects attention and judgment, '*The act of pure observation occurs without judgement ... we must dispense with judgement based on past experience and simply observe what is, what is actually said or done, what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched ... it is the act of the discipline attention that allows us to notice things we sometimes overlook*' (p. 97).

We stay with our feelings and emotions, and allow ourselves to think-feelingly. We permit the confusions, the disorientations, the fears, the joys, the anxieties and whatever other emotions impact us. Moore (2009) sees supervision as the place where supervisees are offered space to explore the empathic impact that work with clients has had on them. '*The supervisee*' he writes, '*requires a high degree of self awareness to differentiate between those feelings arising from her own experiences and those given to her in empathy ... exploring the emotional impact in depth and applying her theoretical understanding helps the supervisee to make sense of her own emotions and gain insight into the client's dilemmas*' (p. 5).

Our next move involves making sense of what we have focused on. We now give meaning to what happened. We tell a story that embodies our way of making meaning (the process) and the meaning itself (the content). Having focused, sifted, observed, looked again, we conclude and assess and evaluate what we experienced. This involves looking at our feelings, being in touch with our thoughts and observing our behaviours. We monitor these feelings: What were you thinking and feeling? Any reasons why you were thinking and feeling this way? Any connections to the past? Voller (2009) uses the word 'resonance' to capture this moment—where feelings, thoughts, intuitions, discernments, body awarenesses and musing all come together.

We now widen our reflective stance to consider other meanings in more depth. If we looked previously at what story we tell, we now review other stories we could tell. We can even look at the way we construct our stories. We look at how we make meaning to see if the very way we have drawn our conclusions means we have missed other ways of making meaning (e.g., we have downloaded experience

rather than allowed it to speak to us, we come with a prejudiced mind, we have categories that entrap us). This sometimes demands suspending our judgement once more to allow other voices to be heard. We become empathetic to other theories, other people, and other approaches. We let go in order to let come (Scharmer, 2007). We allow our intuition, imagination, and creative thoughts and feelings to enter the frame. With analysis we ask further questions: How do you make sense of what happened? Any other ways of making sense of it? Be creative—think of other possible interpretations of the experience

We sift and assess our new insights with our original ideas and thoughts. We evaluate for usefulness. We reach conclusions. We connect our original experiences with our new ways of making meaning and sense of them. We ask evaluative questions: In your view what was good and bad about the experience? What was helpful and unhelpful?

We begin to articulate our learning. We have looked at, given meaning to, critically evaluated how we have given meaning to, and looked at other meanings and sense making procedures and now we draw our conclusions. Possibilities: What else could you have done? Voller (2009) puts this well in asking:

- a) What new knowledge or learning has come through to me?
- b) What am I taking away from reflection in term of insights, feelings, thoughts?
- c) How can I integrate what I have learned into my existing frameworks and knowledge?
- d) How can I make my learning part of myself?
- e) Overall, what have I learned from that experience, about myself? About others? About work and practice?

3. The third stage is the transfer of reflective knowing into action.

The bridge between reflection and action transfers new learning (propositional or declarative knowing) into behaviour (transformational learning). The action plan can be helped by answering questions such as: What will you do differently when you return to that situation? If you were to

encounter that again, what would you do?

Moustakas (1990) captures the process outlined in the three stages above in his phases of research, which can also be named as a journey of reflection. His six steps are:

1. initial engagement;
2. immersion;
3. incubation;
4. illuminating;
5. explication;
6. creative synthesis.

These steps outline the process of reflection chronologically.

Learning reflection

How can we move from a non-reflective stance to a reflexive position? Can we learn how to reflect? An external event is not always needed to engender reflection, but for many people (especially those not used to or skilled in reflection) an external happening often propels them into reflection. Facing a problem makes individuals or groups 'ripe for reflection'. And the type of problem faced is 'ill-structured' which means it does not have a single and solitary solution. Uncertainty, confusion and surprise are often emotional pathways to helping us reconsider and think through what we have never thought through before. Wake-up calls, high-wire moments, shocks and traumas—all are potential triggers for processes of reflection. They impel us to wonder why, to question, to review our old way of thinking which is inadequate to encompass this new event.

The 'internal' requirements that facilitate our reflections are:

- a) Openness and open-mindedness. Rokeach (1960) defines open-mindedness as '*the extent to which a person can receive, evaluate, and act on relevant information received from outside on its own intrinsic merits unencumbered by irrelevant factors in the situation arising from within the person or from outside*' (p. 57). Being honest with oneself, being open to '*whatever truth comes through the door*', being courageous enough to stay with the facts all greatly assist reflection.
- b) Being mindful. *Mindfulness is a particular, purposeful way of being attentive to internal stages of feelings and thoughts and external states of the*

environment and behaviours, from one moment to the next, and holding this awareness with an attitude of acceptance (May & O'Donovan, 2007, p. 48).

c) Invention and imagination i.e., the ability to go beyond our own psychological boundaries and parameters and permit ourselves to think other possibilities.

d) The ability to stop, be still, recall—get distance from.

e) Suspending evaluation, becoming non-evaluative until you have had time to observe and take in all the information.

f) Listening to self and others allows you to make sense of what is happening.

g) Respecting intuition and feelings as guides toward understanding.

h) Thinking as a 'beginner'.

i) Looking for other meanings e.g., how might others make sense of this?

j) Widening one's perspective.

k) Being vulnerable.

l) Befriending the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable.

m) Being emotionally aware—of what is happening to ourselves and to others.

n) The ability to think about and consider events and life in wider perspectives: the helicopter ability. The higher you go up the more you see in context.

Context becomes an important fact in reflection. It allows us to make meaning as part of a particular context. Langer (1989) makes the point that when we ignore context we end up giving one meaning when there may be many. She asks individuals to tell her what she is holding in her hand. What is this, she asks, holding up a pencil? When people confine themselves to defining the object as a pencil she then asks, what could it be? And, of course, there are many things this item we call a pencil could be. By too quickly committing ourselves to its own purpose (a pencil) we can miss the other meanings and uses it might have. She makes the point that while defining a pencil may be innocuous and innocent, what happens when we define a family, or a person? Committing ourselves to one meaning of family can close us off to seeing other meanings of the word, and give rise to prejudice or stereotyping.

Blocks to reflection

Blocks to reflection can also be internal or external. Being stressed, tired, exhausted makes reflection very difficult—the mind is too weary or the opposite, too pre-occupied. In our ‘world of high speed’, it is often impossible to get quality reflection time. Some people cannot be ‘still’ either physically or psychologically, again making reflection difficult. Perhaps we have to move more today towards ‘reflection-in-action’ where the very speed of life means we need to learn to contemplate quickly as we engage in activity. Our society’s glorification of ‘action’ and ‘outcomes’ can often result in poor support for reflective activity because ‘the point of it’ is not billable or rewarded; organizations do not build it into work time. Personality types may also affect the need and the ability to reflect, and whether one is introverted or extroverted may indicate ease or not with reflection in action and reflection on action.

‘Premature cognitive commitment’ is a term coined by Langer (1989) to describe the process when we commit ourselves to an embedded belief, too quickly and without reflection, that then impacts our behaviour. With commitment to a belief, we easily give up reflection. She gives the example of the Ugly Duckling: it committed itself to the cognitive belief that it was a duck and, secondly, that it was ugly. With experience and reflection on its experience came a realisation about who it truly was and, subsequently, its self esteem. Premature cognitive commitments mean we often move too quickly to conclusions that are unwarranted when more reflection and attention to the facts might well result in different conclusions. She includes classification systems in this mindless approach to reality, *‘Mindlessness sets in when we rely too rigidly on categories and distinctions created in the past. Once distinctions are made they take on a life of their own’* (p. 11). Hence, the facts that many lead unreflective lives, even though their lives are based on deep commitments. Siegel (2007) captures this well, *‘As we grow into adulthood, it is very likely that these accumulated layers of perceptual models and conceptual categories constrict subjective time and*

deaden our feelings of being alive. Without the intentional effort to awaken, life speeds by. We habituate to experience, perceiving through the filter of the past and not orientating ourselves to the novel distinctions of the present’ (p.105). Included in the above is a warning about being too certain, too committed to a theory or an orientation—a stance that can lead too easily to premature conclusions or predetermined positions.

The brain is excellent at creating patterns and classification systems. It sets down neural pathways that become habitual ways of perceiving, and when new information enters the system it is first of all compared and contrasted with the old classification systems. The brain’s first task is to make the new information fit the old system. The brain is in fact, quite lazy and sees little reason in wasting valuable energy in considering or finding arguments to reject perfectly well formed beliefs (classifications systems). Fine (2007) calls this the *‘Pigheaded Brain’* and shows colourfully and humorously how we hold onto our beliefs and classification systems even when overwhelming evidence shows the contrary. *‘Evidence that fits with our beliefs is quickly waved through the mental border control. Counter-evidence on the other hand, must submit to close interrogation and even then will probably not be allowed in’* (p. 106).

Expectations are a further way to block our reflection. Unconscious or unspoken expectations impair our ability to reflect. The psychological contract (our internal interpretation of the contracts we have in our lives) often impairs this ability to reflect e.g., a teenager’s expectation that they will be liked by their peer group often muddies their ability to think about what the group does and its usefulness (taking drugs, using alcohol etc). Loyalty (that becomes collusion) impacts the ability to reflect.

Fear and living in survival mode greatly reduces reflection and the ability to make meaning. In general, when fear and anxiety are high, individuals interpret the events in their lives in narrow ways e.g., going into victim mode and blaming others. Another emotion that has a negative effect on our ability to reflect and how we reflect is ‘shame’. Individuals

and groups that come from shame-based backgrounds (either shame-based family systems of shame-based education systems) find it extremely difficult to allow themselves to be vulnerable without being shamed yet again. Reflection means permitting the self to be open to disconfirming what is already known, what is not known, and to be transparent about what can be known. These mental stances can be difficult to take for people from shame-based backgrounds. In admitting or owning their ignorance, doubts, uncertainties they leave themselves open to not living up to their own or others’ expectations. This then plunges them, as it did in the past, into a shame-based place which closes them down and makes them want to withdraw. Learning to reflect for them in an open way often involves having a relationship they can trust not to shame them, and being able to take the risks of being vulnerable. This is quite a relational journey when shame raises its ugly head.

Lack of creativity and outside the box thinking is a further block to reflection: part of reflection is the ability to be creative and imaginative. Gilbert (2006) reminds us that we access the future through imagination. Reflection is a way of accessing the future. When our ability to access imagination (for what ever reason) is limited, then we tend to act in predictable and mindless routines.

In his book entitled *‘The Curse of the Self’*, Leary (2007) draws out the drawbacks of reflection. While a blessing and a highly human activity, there are times when reflection becomes our enemy, not our friend. It is more helpful to be mindless and unreflective when I am trying to get to sleep. Too much reflection, often called rumination, keeps many people awake at night or rouses them early in the morning where their reflective minds refuse to allow them to go back to sleep. Worry, which is a form of reflecting on the future, is equally troublesome at times when we get so caught up in our reflective concerns for the future that we miss what is happening in the present. It is good that we don’t have to reflect on how we drive our cars, dress ourselves in the morning, manage

our PCs or do the shopping. We do these tasks automatically. For actions and behaviours that do not demand creativity or imagination, going onto automatic pilot suits very well. Over reflection has drawbacks in that it;

- interferes with memory,
- puts us out of touch with what we already know,
- disconnects us from cognitive processes (if you think too much about the presentation you are about to give it may well result in choking),
- can result in poorer performance,
- can result in mental illnesses (compulsions, depressions etc.),
- can result in unhelpful behaviour (there is some evidence from surveys on teenage girls that they often smoke as a way of staying thin—the desire to be seen as beautiful makes them take a risk with their health).

The inner world of animals does not include the forms of self-related thoughts that humans have. They do not spin introspective webs of self-related thought. We talk to ourselves. People live in their inner worlds when there is no need to, and even when it pulls them away from attending to life in the external world.

What helps reflection?

A number of factors impact the ability to reflect. Prior experiences are one. Families and schools that encourage children to reflect and think through issues can dramatically affect their ability to reflect later in life. Where children grow up in environments that teach them certainties around ill-structured problems, then they learn easily not to think, but accept the words of authorities. Students bring their pasts to their new experiences. How well they reflect and integrate these new experiences into their lives depends to a large degree on those experiences.

King and Kitchener (1994) make a number of suggestions of how to help people learn how to reflect:

1. show respect for individuals as people regardless of their level of development.
2. understand that individuals differ

regarding their assumptions about knowledge and personalise your interventions. *'When their responses are dogmatic, I foster all their doubts; when they seem mired in scepticism or paralysed by complexity, I push them to make judgements; when their tactics are not fully reflective, I encourage their best efforts to use critical, evaluative thinking'* (Kroll, 1992b, cited in King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 232).

3. introduce 'ill-structured problems' early and encourage individuals to wrestle with them.
4. create opportunities for students to examine different points of view on a topic.
5. help students suspend judgement temporarily.
6. help individuals make judgements and explain what they believe.
7. provide lots of support and lots of challenge.
8. deal with the emotional aspects of learning and realise that much reflection is the ability to understand, name and manage emotional reactions. Big emotions (e.g., shame) can be very detrimental in facilitating reflection.

Langer (1989) suggests a number of ways to help develop mindfulness and reflection:

- creating new categories helps us see old ideas in new ways;
- welcoming new information;
- realising and appreciating more than one view;
- controlling contexts—allowing the context to teach us;
- process before outcomes (from journey to destination learning).

Kline (1999) presents the *'Ten Components of a Thinking Environment'* which, together, help us learn how to think for ourselves. The 10 components are:

1. *attention*: listening with respect, interest and fascination.
2. *incisive questions*: asking questions that facilitate reflection.
3. *equality*: treating others as equal thinking peers.
4. *appreciation*: looking with eyes that see the positive.

5. *ease*: slowing down and freeing from rush or urgency.
6. *encouragement*: moving beyond competition.
7. *feelings*: allowing ourselves to feel.
8. *information*: finding out as much as possible.
9. *place*: an environment that says 'you matter'.
10. *diversity*: adding quality because of difference.

There is no doubt that questions are a key way to facilitate reflection. The right question jolts, goes to the heart of the matter, surprises, makes the listener realise that their solutions to date no longer work with this issue. Reflective questions lead to insight. Kagan's IPR (1980) is an excellent way of assisting reflection.

One way to facilitate reflection is to help learners find their own voice (Belenky et al., 1986). Voicing reflections helps encourage reflection—there is some truth in the statement 'I do not know what I know until I have said it, or written it down'. Giving feedback is another way to help individuals begin to reflect.

In summary, individuals learn to reflect at ever deepening levels when they:

- learn how to be empathetic and see events from other perspectives;
- are confused in their thinking;
- begin to look at the consequences of their behaviour;
- monitor and articulate their feelings;
- are challenged to look at what they are doing and why they are doing it;
- ask incisive questions;
- create connections to others;
- specifically go out to meet others who are different and think differently;
- are shocked;
- move towards authenticity and congruence;
- begin to self-disclose;
- build up their thinking skills;
- stop;
- are prepared to experiment;
- use counselling, training or courses to review their way of reflecting;
- are allowed to change roles;

- befriend the uncomfortable and unfamiliar;
- put themselves in challenging (stretching) situations;
- live with groups that think differently.

Reflection is too important to be left to chance. Too much depends on it to hope that it might be picked up during the journey of life. Rather, it seems wiser to teach or facilitate how to reflect, so that individuals and groups can be assured of having such a precious commodity. While facilitating reflection has been defined as an individual task, there is no doubt that helping people to reflect in groups is also a valuable way to help individuals.

Perception and reflection

De Bono quotes Perkins' work (2006) to show that in ordinary thinking 90 per cent of errors made are typically errors of perception and not of logic. Defective or inadequate perception results in defective conclusions and in turn in poor interventions. Langer (1989) quotes numerous examples of where poor perception leads to catastrophic conclusions—a doctor who sees a senile old woman and does not notice she has a brain tumour, or a cabin crew who follow a routine but fail to perceive it was icy outside. She, in turn, concludes 'when we blindly follow routines or unwittingly carry out senseless orders, we are acting like automatons, with potentially grave consequences for ourselves and others' (p. 4). We fail to notice what is within our experience and in turn trust another system e.g., what we have been taught, or authority, to make the decision for us. James (1953) seems to have it right, 'The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes'.

The philosopher, Kant, pointed out many centuries ago that perception (the faculty that allows us to see the present) is the result of a number of intertwined factors. What our eyes see combines with what we already think, feel, know, want and believe, and we use this combination of sensory information and pre-existing knowledge to construct our perception of reality. Note the 'our perception' of reality. As Gilbert (2006) puts it 'our

brains reweave experiences; your brain already anticipates the ending. We add what we already know (past) to what we currently see or perceive to predict what will happen next.'

Conclusion

While there is much literature and research on reflection and reflective practice, there is relatively little to help individuals and small groups learn how to be reflective, and how to be reflective about being reflective (reflexivity). This article describes what reflective learning means and considers the elements that support reflection, and factors that block being reflective. It sets forth a model of reflection that can be used by trainers to help them train practitioners in reflection and, in particular, how to use reflection in supervision. Finally, suggestions are offered on how we can help others, in this case supervisees, learn how to be more reflective.

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