

Critical reflection for service providers, community and students: lessons and activities for service-learning

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“We had the experience but missed the meaning” (Eliot, 1979, 26)

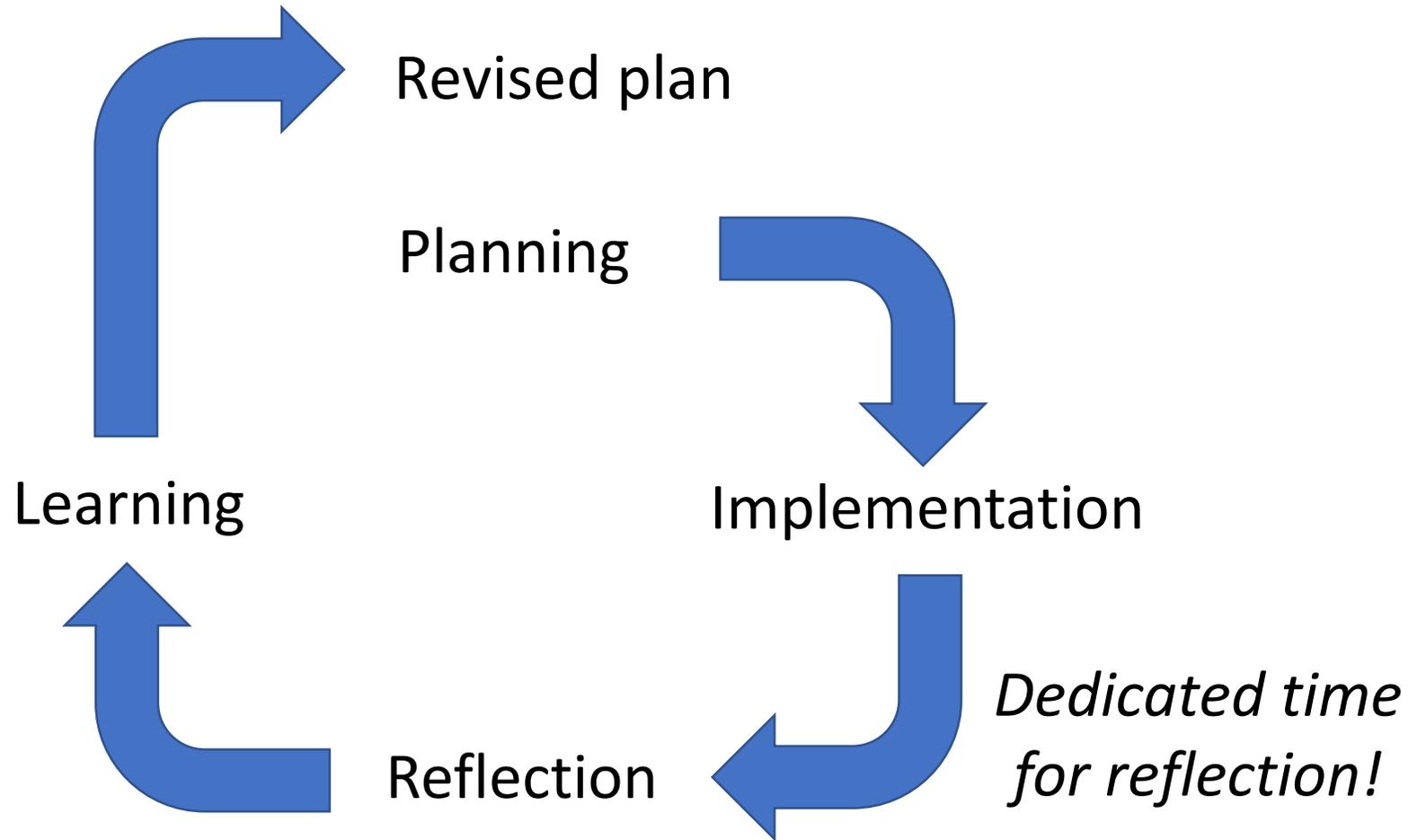
Reflection is the process by which we better understand our experiences, make sense of our experiences, make meaning from our experiences. Reflection can be an individual or a group process.

Practitioners of *critical action learning* believe that
“...participants also need to reflect on the assumptions and beliefs that shape practice.”
(Marsick and O’Neil, 1999, 163)

- There is no one “right” way of reflecting.
 - Reflection is a process, not an event.
- Reflection is not purely an “academic activity.” It is a process through which anyone can learn more consciously.
- Explore and discover the ways that are most useful for yourself and your teams.
- Decide about how deeply you want to reflect – the process can take one to some challenging places!

One version of the Action Learning Cycle

(Action Learning was developed by Reg Revans in the 1940s)



Examples of reflection questions for action learning (there are many, many more...)

- What went well? (How do we know?)
 - Planning
 - Implementation
 - Teamwork
 - Outcomes
 - etc
- What didn't go so well? (How do we know?)
 - Planning
 - Implementation
 - Teamwork
 - Outcomes
 - etc
- What do we want to do differently next time? (Keep doing? Stop doing?)
- Who else should be involved in the process?
- How should we best document our learnings? (Writing, photographs, video, formal, informal, etc.)
- How can we best share our learnings?

Reflection as an ongoing process

- *Reflection as an ongoing process in which participants reflect both on their own, and together, to learn and to seek meaning.*
- Learning as change, in the ways that we
 - Think
 - Feel
 - Act
- Grappling with change is usually an ongoing *process* (a way of being,) rather than a concrete *step* in a cycle – the learning is in the engagement with change.

(For more on learning as change, see van Houten (1995))

So, what supports reflection as process?

1. Individual reflection:

- Some form of “record keeping.” This can take the form of a learning journal, drawings, audio recordings, blogs, vlogs, etc.
- Setting aside time each day for reflection. This doesn’t have to be about sitting quietly (although it often is.) Some people find that reflection works best when they are jogging, or gardening, or listening to music – the important thing is to still the usual busyness of the mind.
- Helpful questions:
 - What did I *actually experience* (see, hear, read, etc) today (or this week)? Describe as clearly as you can.
 - How do I feel about these experiences?
 - What is changing for me at this point? (Changes may be very subtle and may not be easily identifiable on a daily basis.)
 - What do these experiences and changes mean for me, in terms of my life journey? (Goals, beliefs, biases, relationships, etc.)
 - What new questions and/or intentions do I now have? (These can help us to find our way into the future)

Learning journals

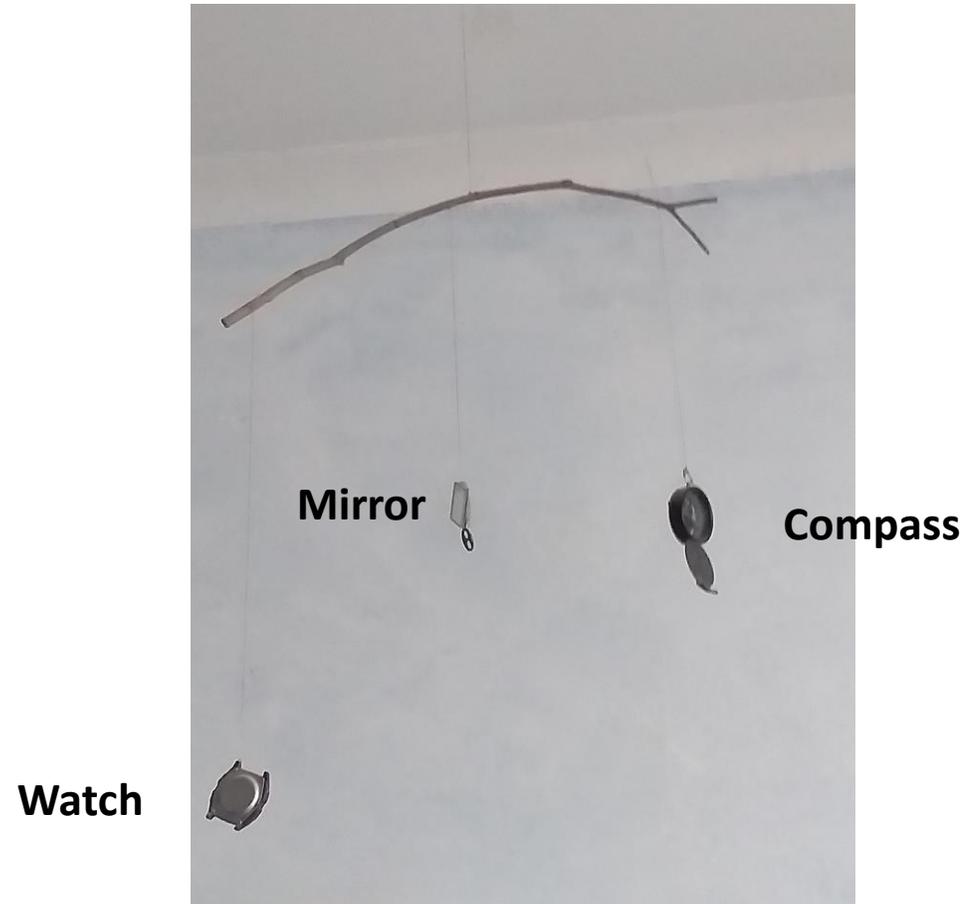


So, what supports reflection as process?

2. Reflecting with others

- Reflection in service learning should involve all partners reflecting and learning together, as much as possible. It is not about the academic partner doing the “learning.” However, partners may sometimes need to conduct their own sector-specific reflections if circumstances require this.
- When we come together to reflect, it is always helpful to start with a time for individual reflection. This allows everyone to gather their thoughts so that they have something to contribute to the conversation.
- Move on to small group conversations. This allows participants who may be quiet a chance to be heard by at least one other person (everyone’s views are important, and everyone deserves to be heard.) Small groups of three could include a partner from each sector.
- NB: A conversation requires that we listen deeply to others – it is not about pushing one’s own viewpoint or agenda. It is not about proving a point or showing how someone else is “wrong.” It is respectful. It is for inquiring together. Power should never be an issue in conversations (although that is sometimes difficult.)
- Helpful questions:
 - What did we *actually experience* (see, hear, read, etc) today (or this week)? Describe as clearly as you can.
 - How do we feel about these experiences?
 - What is changing for us at this point? (Changes may be very subtle and may not be identifiable on a daily basis.)
 - What do these experiences and changes mean for us, in terms of what we are trying to achieve together? (The exploration of goals, beliefs, biases, assumptions, relationships, etc.) *Interesting question: How is this service-learning process contributing to social transformation? How do we know?*
 - What new questions and/or intentions do we now have? (These can help us to find our way into the future)
- Sharing of learnings in plenary – again, a respectful conversational approach facilitates openness and honesty.

Direction, time, reflection...



References

- Eliot, T. S. (1979). *Four quartets*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Marsick, V. J., & O'Neil, J. (1999). The many faces of action learning. *Management Learning*, 30(2), 159-176.
- van Houten, C. (1995). *Awakening the will. Principles and processes in adult learning*. London: Temple Lodge.