



## Masterclass

## Enhancing skills of critical reflection to evidence learning in professional practice



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## ABSTRACT

Professional organisations and regulatory bodies are making critical reflection a mandatory component of professional practice. Reflection is a vital part of learning from experience and is central to developing and maintaining competency across a practitioner's lifetime. This paper will discuss key educational theories to illustrate why reflection is important. Kolb's and Gibbs' reflective cycles are used to structure the process of critical reflection. Elements of the educational tradition of *Bildung* are discussed and integrated to enrich the understanding of self and to facilitate the reader's ability to enhance their professional practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Physiotherapists, amongst other health professionals, are now being asked to provide evidence of continuing professional education and reflective practice as part of professional registration and licensing processes around the world (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009, Roberts, 2002). Over the last 10 years there has been a shift from evidencing formal learning in portfolio's, such as merely using official certificates of attendance, to documenting how both formal and experiential learning impact on changes in practice (Jasper & Rolfe, 2011). Reflection is a critical part of learning from experience and is important in developing and maintaining competency across a practitioner's practice lifetime. Despite little direct evidence in the literature associating reflective practice and competency (Mann et al., 2009) professional organisations and regulatory bodies are making reflective practice a mandatory component of professional practice. The International Federation of Sports Physical Therapists (IFSPT) requires physiotherapists applying for their accreditation process to demonstrate a variety of reflective pieces relating to their devised Sports Physiotherapy competencies (Bulley et al., 2005). This need to evidence professional development and its impact on an individual's practice increases pressures for Physiotherapists to become competent reflective practitioners.

Moon (2001) discusses that we cannot actually see learning but only the impact the learning has on practice and behaviours,

termed the representation of learning. It is with this in mind that linking this learning back to practice is imperative and being able to evidence this is critical when maintaining portfolios of evidence in relation to maintaining practice accreditation or licensing.

This paper will refresh the reader's knowledge of reflection and its application. It will illustrate why reflection is important and will develop the reader's use of familiar reflective models (Gibbs and Kolb) by integrating components of *Bildung*, an educational tradition of self-cultivation, to encourage deeper levels of understanding. An example scenario will be used to highlight the practical application of the concepts discussed.

## 2. What is reflection?

It is clear in the literature that reflection is not just thinking or going back over an event in the mind, which occurs commonly in everyday life. The purpose of reflection is to work out what is already known and add new information with the result of drawing out knowledge, new meaning and a higher level of understanding (Moon, 2004). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) describes reflection within the context of consciously looking and thinking about experiences, actions, emotions, feelings and responses then interpreting them in order to learn from them. Similarities can be drawn from both authors' descriptions of reflection. That it is a conscious and systematic approach to thinking about experiences with the aim of learning and changing behaviours. Reflection should challenge a person's understanding of themselves, their attitudes and behaviours so that any biases are unearthed, thus allowing that

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### Scenario

Physiotherapist A, Anna, meets her more experienced colleague Physiotherapist B, Barbara, in the office and asks for her opinion on a patient she is treating. Anna explains how she found a recent sports massage course really useful and that she learnt lots of different techniques. Particularly, she has been using the techniques that involve active movement of the area by the patient while a stroking technique is applied. She feels that she is confident in applying the correct technique. However, she has been using the technique on an athlete with a mild hamstring strain but he is not functionally improving as she had hoped. Barbara explains she is not that familiar with the techniques but they discuss factors that should be addressed with hamstring strains and Anna realises she had not integrated the new techniques with other aspects of exercise rehabilitation that is needed for optimal recovery. Immediately after the discussion Anna felt a bit embarrassed she had not realised her current management of her athlete was lacking some key components but will integrate this into her plan immediately and remember this for future patients. Four weeks later the colleagues chatted again and the athlete's hamstring strain had improved well and they were back training fully. Anna thanked her colleague for her advice and in return Barbara said she had benefited from the conversation as she had done some reading about the new techniques herself and is now using them in her later stage treatments as she feels this is where they fit most appropriately and is finding them useful.

(Biesta, 2007). It is comprised of several interrelated concepts that are illustrated in Fig. 1.

By writing and talking about experiences (narrative), considering the historical, social and cultural contexts, learning occurs. The nature of this learning is self-reflective and is a dialogue of thinking and doing that includes moral questions about ethical practice and the worthwhile nature of activities (Schön, 1987). An individual takes responsibility for their intellectual, emotional and moral learning and is willing to take a risk to change for personal and professional growth. *Bildung* recognises the on-going nature of learning and that it takes time for change to occur or for learning to be apparent. The increased understanding and development of moral growth, improves the society in which the individual works (Biesta, 2002; Gadamer, 2004).

The scenario demonstrates Anna initially demonstrating a more superficial approach to her learning, but her reflection on the patient and discussion with her colleague allowed her to start to integrate this learning and shows the beginning of her changing her practice; becoming transformative learning.

### 2.3. Knowledge, skill and expertise

The delivery of physiotherapy services is concerned with accountability, the concept of evidence-based practice and clinical effectiveness. Consequently Physiotherapists need to continually review their practice in a critical and analytical manner to ensure they are adhering to these concepts (Donaghy & Morss, 2000). There are many occasions where current evidence does not advocate a particular practice and it is in these situations of clinical uncertainties that Schön (1983) suggests reflection has great importance enabling personal experience and the knowledge gained from the experience to inform decision making processes.

There are many components to reflection and two separate discourses are described by Rolfe and Gardner (2006); learning about our practice (epistemological) associated with generating knowledge from and about practice and learning about our self (ontological) associated with exploring who we are as practitioners rather than what we know (Rolfe, 2011). These components are both associated with ways in generating knowledge. Knowledge itself, when explored as a term, has many uses and meanings.

Higgs and Titchen (2000) name three types of knowledge that are critical for clinical decision making: propositional, professional craft and personal knowledge. Propositional knowledge, which can be expressed in language, incorporates scholarly learning such as books, journals and empirical scientific methods. Professional craft is derived from professional experience, is often tacit in nature, and associated

individual to become more critical about their views of practice and the world (Jasper & Rolfe, 2011). The consequences of integrating reflective practice into one's own practice can include enhancement of patient care, the bridging of the theory-practice gap, the resolution of practice-related problems and the stimulation of critical thinking to foster changes in practice (Duffy, 2007).

### 2.1. Reflection and learning

Many early definitions of reflection focused on its education origins and viewed it as a method of learning from practice (Jasper & Rolfe, 2011). Habermas (1987), an influential sociologist, emphasised the importance of 'self-knowledge' and encouraged reflection as a way of emancipation from externally imposed views and beliefs. Mezirow (1997) developed this concept and placed importance on the individual learning to make their own interpretations of events and situations rather than acting on beliefs and judgements of others. This transformative learning develops autonomous thinking. Everyone has 'habits of mind' and 'a point of view' and these two dimensions form a frame of reference that define individuals. The frame of reference can be transformed through critical reflection on these assumptions, habits and beliefs leading to significant personal transformation. Being reflective of one's own assumptions is critical for transforming one's 'taken-for-granted' frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Therefore, using the above concepts of learning, reflection is an integral part of developing deep learning. Mann et al. (2009) concluded, in their systematic review, that current literature suggests that reflection and a deep approach to learning seems integrally related and mutually enhancing.

### 2.2. Bildung

*Bildung* is a transformative, self-educative process whereby an individual takes responsibility for personal and cultural maturation

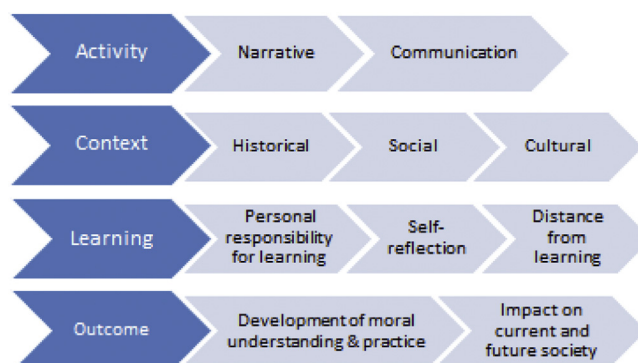


Fig. 1. Elements associated with Bildung.

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