What is reflection? A conceptual analysis of major definitions and a proposal of a five-component model

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Tags
Clinical domain
General

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Teaching and learning
Undergraduate
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Continuing professional development

Background

When I started grad school, the first book I picked up was Donald Schon’s Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. It was a great place to start for a career in health professions education. The book challenged educators to move down from the “ivory tower” of discrete interventions and well-defined evaluations into the messy swamp of interesting, but complex, ideas. The concept of reflection is indeed messy. Intuitively, we readily understand the construct. But in deconstructing the process things become messy.

This paper attempts to synthesize multiple conceptions of reflection providing learners and educators with a framework that is usable.

*An interesting side note is the Schon’s PhD thesis built on the work of Dewey, who pioneered the concept of reflection.

Purpose

"This study was conducted in order to identify, explore and analyse the most
influential conceptualisations of reflection, and to develop a new theory-informed and unified definition and model of reflection.”

**Type of paper**

Systematic review

**Key Points on the Methods**

A quasi-systematic review was performed. MEDLINE, EMBASE and PsychINFO were searched. (ERIC and Google Scholar were not included.) A restricted time frame (2008-2012) was used for reasons not readily apparent.

In a first (for me) the articles included in the search where used to identify the (arbitrary) 15 most cited authors on the topic... and not the actual manuscripts.

A thematic analysis was conducted by ONE author. With each iteration, the other authors contributed to achieve consensus on the analysis.

**Key Outcomes**

Reflection is a specific form of thinking. Reflection involves 5 core components:

1. Thoughts and actions
   a. The content (“what”) that is being reflected on
   b. The experience (i.e. actions) that is being reflected on
2. Attentive, critical, exploratory and iterative processes
   a. Reflection is analytical
3. An underlying conceptual frame
   a. The conscious/unconscious perspectives/assumptions/structures that bound reflection
4. The view on change
   a. What is the process by which reflection leads to something new
5. Self
   a. Reflection should incorporate the content/experiences of “my self” and what the reflective process says “about me”

Reflection cannot occur in isolation. Two extrinsic components influence the reflective process.

6. The trigger of reflection
   a. An experience
7. The context of reflection
   a. Timing e.g. reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action

Figure 4 provides a conceptual diagram that integrates the 7 components that inform reflection.

**Key Conclusions**
The authors conclude "We propose that our conceptualisation, rather than amplifying the problem of the lack of common understandings and applications of reflection, may serve as a current meta-definition and meta-model to provide a sound framework for understanding and operationalising reflection. In Kurt Lewin’s thoughtful words, there is nothing as practical as a good theory”

Spare Keys – other take home points for clinician educators

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose. It is interesting to note that 85 years after reflection was introduced into the education literature it remains a «hot topic» (and until now variably defined). What are the core principles of learning? Motivation/need, action/experience, knowledge coding, reflection, feedback?