

*Critical Reflection as a Concept and Technique of
Behavioural Change*

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Reflection is broadly used in many contexts such as education, professional work settings, and therapy. It also takes many forms and purposes, ranging from simply describing what happened, to unravelling feelings and thoughts, to personal or professional change. This paper aims at providing a brief introduction to the concept of critical reflection. Critical reflection is contemplated based on some key scholars and educators, and it is put forward as a technique to foster behavioural insight and change.

The word reflection consists of ‘re’ and ‘flection’, the latter being derived from the Latin word *flexere*, which means to bend, curve or turn. Re-flection, therefore, essentially means something like re-turn – something that has happened to or was experienced by an individual, returns to this individual. Scholars such as John Dewey (e.g. Dewey, 1933, 1938), Carol Rodgers (e.g. Rodgers, 2002), Fred Korthagen (e.g. Korthagen, 1993), Stephen Brookfield (e.g. Brookfield, 2017) and Donald Schön (e.g. Schön, 1983) have described reflection in different, yet overlapping formulations. Rodgers (2002) and Winter (1988) offer a general perspective on reflection, arguing that the function of reflection is to make meaning and sense of experiences. Dewey (1933, p. 9) provides a more specific formulation, holding that this ‘meaning making’ derives from formulating relationships between experiences and knowledge as a result of “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” Rodgers agrees with Dewey, writing that these relationships do not just “arise from mulling over something” (2002, p. 849). Rather, insight into events, causes, consequences and the relationships involved is the result of a systematic approach on the one hand – many scholars identify and propose phases or steps – and inspecting the self on the other hand, creating “a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt” (Dewey, 1910, p. 9). This implies that

experiences should carefully and systematically be examined while accepting the trouble, or initial lack of insight, that accompanies the process that is aimed at making meaning from complexities.

Reflecting therefore is not simply recalling experiences or ideas, but, to use Dewey's (1986, p. 114) words, "involves a con-sequence instead of simply a sequence of ideas – a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as a proper outcome, while each outcome in turn leans back on, or refers to, its predecessors." The supporting grounds mentioned above are also significant to Brookfield (2017), who states that the most distinctive feature of the reflective process is its focus on discovering and unravelling assumptions. This is what makes reflection critical: in order to *critically* analyse experiences, ideas and relationships or con-sequences, we must examine our assumptions that establish our analytical framework and our personal reality. One's paradigmatic assumptions contain personal definitions and assumed (and also: expected) causalities, and prescribe how things 'are' in this personal reality. Questioning such a personal framework and reality is what makes reflection critical and what can offer actual in-depth insights. With this, Brookfield puts emphasis on inquiry as a means to question assumptions and examine context and framework, just like Dewey (1933), Rodgers (2002) and Korthagen (1993, 1998) do. In doing so, they plead for an active process of reflection, which may explain why they propose techniques and instruments to scaffold, and foster the use of, reflection.

Brookfield's (2017) tools and techniques are aimed at improving practice; Korthagen's (1993) Reflective Cycle (which is based on David Kolb's learning theories) explicitly urges us to create alternatives to behaviour, to try these, and to evaluate the following experiences; Race (2005) holds that reflection deepens learning in general; and Rodgers (2002, p. 845) states that reflection results in "deeper understanding of relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas," implying that reflection generates knowledge and provides meaning and context to experiences. Such knowledge and meaning would offer the opportunity to choose those ideas and actions that support the desired course of life. All of these more recent perspectives on evaluating experiences neatly fit in Dewey's (1944, p. 74) definition of education in which he formulates growth as "that reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases [one's] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."

Hence, the developmental power of reflection exists in critically analysing personal reality and events, and with that, learning about one's input (behaviour) and the consequences that follow. This development, or 'learning' if we adopt Dewey's view on education, can expose itself as a change in doing, beliefs, or ideas. Progression and learning outcomes therefore depend on the thinking in reflection. Reflective thinking is the key to change and development, or as

Dewey (1933, p. 176) puts it: "learning is learning to think." Indeed, development by means of trial and error also is a form of learning, because certain behaviour gets reinforced (either positively or negatively) by the consequences experienced, directing future doing. However, there could be numerous trials and errors, near errors, trials without *ceteris paribus*, or factors not being taken into account influencing trials, without any form of understanding or psychological development at all – the change could even be solely a reflex. Thinking *actively*, however, can guide our development, or influence reinforcement of behaviour, by comparing circumstances, and analysing 'input behaviour' and its consequences. Therefore, active thinking is the foundation of critical reflection. Being able to learn effectively requires thinking, and therefore, learning is thinking, and learning is learning to think. It is thinking that makes learning effective, deliberate, and purposeful.

Considering the described perspectives on reflection, it could be argued that reflection *has to be critical in order to scaffold development*. That is to say, when using reflection as a technique, it is necessary to analyse events, causalities, context, and beliefs and assumptions in order to gain the understanding needed to develop. Experience without deliberate contemplation and reflection on the context and influences does not axiomatically lead to learning (e.g. Loughran, 2002), not to mention to purposeful, directed learning. If one aims at personal or professional development in a certain direction, insight into the relationships between assumptions, behaviour, and course of life can offer the ability to *direct* this course of life.

According to Rodgers (2002, p. 844), "Dewey reminds us that reflection is a complex, rigorous, intellectual, and emotional enterprise that takes time to do well." Rodgers mentions some important elements of reflection, and notes that experiences seldom come without emotions. Because the combination of emotions and rationality causes reflection to be a complex endeavour, critical reflection often is rigorous and demanding. Emotions might obscure proper analysis of facts, but, on the other hand, provide meaning to experiences and influence appreciation of behaviour and consequences. Dewey (1910, 1933) and others proposing models and techniques, offer a helping hand with their writings that aim at systematic analysis to construct an adequate foundation for future decision-making and purposeful behaviour. This does not mean emotions should be excluded. A systematic approach to reflection actually allows for including emotions, feelings and views (even those from other people involved in the context that is reflected upon), while creating a sort of distance from the *self*. This can add to a more balanced overview of actions, consequences and parties involved. Rodgers (2002) describes this by stating that the community, for instance colleagues or significant others, can act as testing grounds. Sharing thoughts "reveals the strengths and holes in one's thinking" (2002, p. 856) and moreover, alternative behaviour can be tried in one's social context, offering – again – opportunities for critical reflection on new experiences. Critical reflection

on experience by involving others can help to construct a more adequate, complete view on oneself and the environment, and to behave and change effectively within this environment or specific context. That way, reflective thinking makes systematic preparations and interventions possible (Dewey, 1933) and helps us taking informed actions (Brookfield, 2017) that constitute change.

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