

Observe, Reflect, Action!

Transformation through Reflective Practice in Librarianship

*Silvia Vong**

Introduction

The idea of reflection on one's experiences and environment is not a novel one. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" discusses the importance of truth through reflection. The allegory begins with a description of prisoners who are confined and shackled in a cave and can only see shadows. They are only able to construct their understanding of the world through shadows and assumptions. When or if they leave the cave, they will struggle to see objects and themselves but eventually, over time, adjust to the natural light. Socrates explains that "last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; he will contemplate him as he is."¹ While this allegory illustrates the need for reflection to reach truth. John Dewey posits that the act of reflection is challenging and requires effort. He writes that "if the suggestion that occurs is at once accepted, we have uncritical thinking, the minimum of reflection. To turn the thing over in mind, to reflect, means to hunt for additional evidence, for new data, that will develop the suggestion, and will either, as we say, bear it out or else make obvious its absurdity and irrelevance."² In librarianship, performance reviews or assessments may appear to be a form of reflection, however, these occur on an annual basis and the depth of reflection may be more of a description, rather than a critical review of one's own thoughts and actions.

Reflective thinking requires "acquiring attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur."³ It is important to note that there is a difference between a reflection and a critical reflection since these terms are used interchangeably but in fact, mean two different things. Brookfield writes that:

Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinctive purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interest.⁴

Furthermore, this paper focuses on reflection-on-action⁵ rather than reflection-in-action. Schon differentiates between both types of reflection, explaining that reflection-on-action as reflective practice post-incident or experience whereas reflection-in-action is the act of reflection during an incident or experience. This paper explores various frameworks in education and nursing literature to present methods of reflection that go beyond summarizing one's experiences. Furthermore, this paper provides a few methods of assessing the depth of the reflection to ensure quality and action from reflections.

* *Silvia Vong is Collaborative Learning Librarian at the University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto; silvia.vong@utoronto.ca.*

Literature Review

Grant explores the literature on reflection in the library and information sector through a systematic review.⁶ Grant found that some of the literature on reflective practice was published in newsletters as well as peer reviewed journals. She writes that “the first examples of reflective practice...tend towards reminiscences, were largely explanatory in nature with individuals looking back at their career, often in a nostalgic way.” Grant’s review provided some literature to review in detail but as stated, many of the articles were more like summaries than structured reflections.

A wealth of literature on reflective practice exists in medicine, nursing and education. However, little literature and training are provided in librarianship. The literature that does discuss reflective practice vary in application. For example, Gaebler’s article is a reflection on the state of librarianship.⁷ It provides a summation of discussions during a two day seminar with library leaders. The article is more of a summary of the talks rather than an analysis of an incident. While a summary of events or incidents may suffice as a record, it requires more depth. The voice of the writer/reflector is not present in the article and therefore, reads more like a summary rather than a reflection.

Reflection is used as a methodology for research in the library literature.⁸ Houtman connects narrative inquiry as a form of reflection as well as a tool for teaching. She writes that “there has lately been an increased awareness in the profession of reflection as a tool for improving instruction.”⁹ The data collected through the personal narratives provide an insight on librarians’ experiences and practice. The librarians in the narratives also acknowledge the affective aspect of their experiences and practices. Suarez uses reflective teaching journals as a way to collect data and analyze librarian’s experiences with teaching information literacy. He explains that “the reflective practice approach allowed the librarian to acquire insights from these experiences that in turn became a prime source of knowledge.”¹⁰ Suarez’s research shows the gaps and challenges with the consultation process as well as helped the librarians “formalize the process of reflecting...by providing a repository for librarian observations and ideas.”¹¹ The reflective process while insightful for research such as collecting data and analyzing teaching librarians’ experiences can also be used as a tool for improving teaching practices.

Tompkins’ research demonstrates how reflections can help guide internal or personal discussions around improving teaching.¹² Tompkins writes that “reflection is a key component of the action research process, starting with the initial determination of the problems through analyzing the results of the research.”¹³ Tompkins deepens the reflective process by including a critical component that links theory and practice to the teaching sessions, which help identify underlying gaps and assumptions which can be addressed in future library sessions. Tompkins provides a good example of reflective practice and identifies the challenges of developing meaningful reflections on teaching.

While Tompkins provides a great example and discussion on the use of reflective practice for teaching, Greenall and Sen explore the use of reflections or engagement in reflective practice in librarianship within the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP).¹⁴ It is important to note that 50% of the respondents to the survey sent to librarians were from the higher education sector and the rest varied from public to medical libraries. Many of the librarians indicated that they reflected but privately or with individuals through journals or blogs. However, the study does not describe any frameworks or reflective methods used for these outlets. The study shows that many librarians may reflect on their work and practice but their method and quality of reflection is not clear.

Goosney, Smith, and Gordon provide a detailed description of reflective practice with peers using a set of questions that prompt a librarian to review the teaching session.¹⁵ Reflection is used as a tool to improve on teaching practices. Goosney, Smith, and Gordon write that “the primary goals of RPM [Reflective Peer Mentoring]...

TABLE 1
Kolb Translated into Prompts for Reflection

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle	Reflective Prompt
Concrete Experience	Describe the incident or experience.
Observations	Why was the experience positive or negative?
Formation of Abstract Concepts	What worked well or did not work well?
Testing Concepts in New Situations	What would you change or do differently?

Source: David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984): 21.

are to create opportunities for reflective practice and promote collaboration and idea-sharing in order to facilitate professional growth and to strengthen the instructional practice of individual participants.¹⁶ The librarians meet multiple times to discuss and share their observations and reflections. The reflections are guided by and framed around Kolb's four stage experiential learning cycle. This article provides a good example of reflective practice in action, where multiple methods are applied, including peer to peer reflection, reflections guided by reflective frameworks with theoretical foundations, and assessment of the reflections. Kolb is often cited and used to frame reflections, however, there are many other frameworks of reflection used in various professions.

Models of Reflective Practice

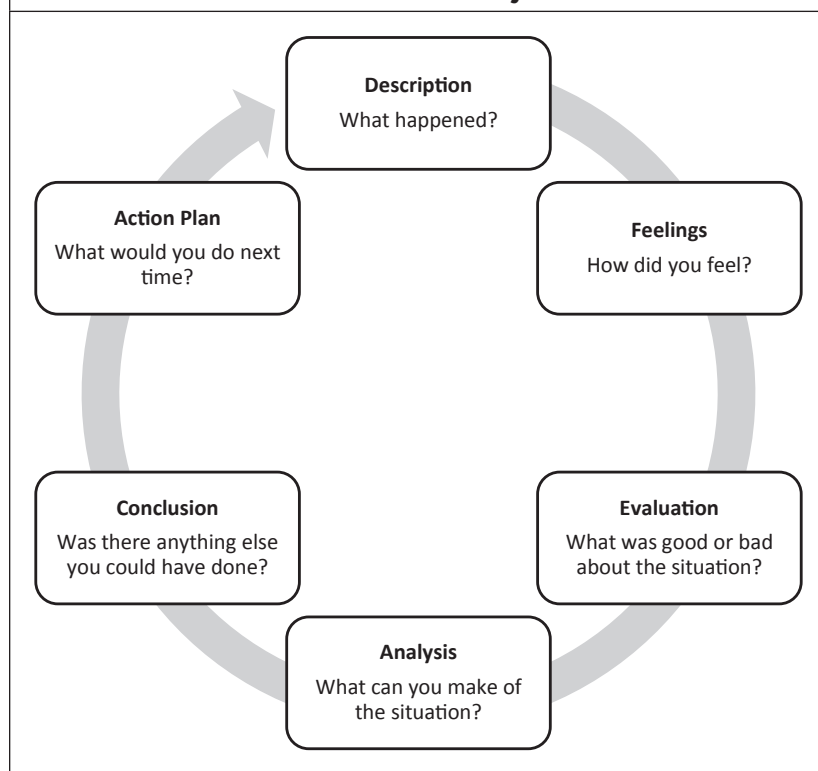
Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is often cited in literature related to reflective practice. However, it is important to note that it originated from the Lewinian Experiential Learning Model, as cited by Kolb.¹⁷ The cycle outlines

four stages of the learning process: the "concrete experience, observations, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and testing concepts in new situations."¹⁸ These four stages typically translate into prompts (see Table 1).

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle is often cited as an effective reflective framework in the nursing and medical literature in reference to professional development. Gibbs' reflective cycle has six stages rooted in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.¹⁹ Gibb considers the affective experience and includes a stage that prompts the identification of the emotions during the incident or experience. Furthermore, Gibbs extends Kolb's fourth stage and includes a conclusion and action plan (see Figure 1).

Johns Model of Structured Reflection (MSR) was further developed

FIGURE 1
Gibbs' Reflective Cycle²⁰



from the work of Palmer and Carper.²¹ Johns created five cues to guide reflections in the nursing profession. The five cues are classified under “aesthetics, personal, ethics, empirics and reflexivity.”²² The framework includes a series of questions for each cue (see Table 2). Before engaging with the questions, there should be a description of the incident or experience.

TABLE 2 Johns’ Model of Structured Reflection	
Cue	Question(s)
Aesthetics	What was I trying to do? Why did I act or think that way? What were the consequences? How did I feel in that situation? How was the other person feeling? How do you know how the person(s) was feeling?
Personal	How did I feel in the situation? What internal or external factors influenced my decisions?
Ethics	How did my actions match my beliefs?
Empirics	What knowledge informed me?
Reflexivity	How does this connect with other experiences?

Source: Christopher Johns, “Framing learning through reflection within Carper’s fundamental ways of knowing in nursing,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 22, no. 2 (1995), 227.

Borton’s Developmental Framework was further developed by Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper.²³ There are three levels that begin with a descriptive level (What), followed by theory and knowledge building (So What) and finally, action orientated reflection (now what).²⁴ Each level is guided by a series of questions (see Table 3).

TABLE 3 Borton’s (further developed by Rolfe et al.) Developmental Framework		
Description	Theory and Knowledge	Action-Orientated
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the problem or reason for the incident? • What was my role? • What were the results of my actions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So what does this show me in regards to the people involved in the situation? • What was I thinking during the incident? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now what do I need do, improve or stop to rectify the situation?

Source: Melanie Jasper, *Beginning Reflective Practice* (Hampshire, UK: Cengage Learning, 2013), 102.

These frameworks help to guide or prompt reflective thought with more depth. Annual reports and other forms of assessment in librarianship do not always prompt affective or analytical discussion around incidences and experiences. These frameworks help to ensure that reflections move beyond description. There are many similarities and some differences in each framework. Most of the frameworks begin with a description of the incident so that details of the experience are recorded for the reflection. The affective aspect is often addressed at the second or third stages. Finally, an action is often prompted in the final stages to ensure that the reflection leads to changes in behavior or decisions for the future. However, one question that emerged while examining the different reflective frameworks was the quality of the reflection. As a result, assessments for reflections were explored to further ensure quality reflections.

Assessment

Many of the assessments for reflection described are outlined into levels to illustrate achievement in reflective thinking. Van Manen's Levels of Reflection is cited in the literature related to reflective practice.²⁵ It is important to note that Goodman and Van Manen's work is cited interchangeably, however, Van Manen was first to publish on the levels of reflectivity with Goodman citing his work. The first level is a reflection that connects educational theory and concepts to the experience. The second level is a reflection that identifies assumptions that influences the teacher's methods. In the final level, the reflection is generated through a political and social lens. For example, librarians would "critique domination, of institutions, and of repressive forms of authority."²⁶ The third or final level is considered the highest form of reflection according to Van Manen.

Sparks-Langer et al.'s developed the Framework for Reflective Thinking as a way to assess the way students think or reflect on teaching. There are seven levels in the framework with the lowest level (1) being a reflection with no descriptive language and the highest level (7) being a reflection that considers ethical, social and political issues.²⁷ The framework was influenced by the work of Kolb, Van Manen, and research in cognitive psychology. The framework provides a brief description for each level (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
Sparks-Langer et al.'s Framework for Reflective Thinking

Level	Description
1	No descriptive language
2	Brief and simple description
3	Use of educational terms in the description
4	Teaching preferences are in the description
5	A description of the incident in connection with educational theory
6	A description of the incident with educational theory and contextual details
7	A description of the incident with social, cultural and political considerations

Source: Sparks-Langer, Georgea M., Simmons, Joanne M., Pasch, Marvin, Colton, Amy, and Starko, Alane. "Reflective pedagogical thinking: How can we promote it and measure it?" *Journal of Teacher Education* 41, no. 4 (1990): 27.

Ryan and Ryan's 4R Reflection Scale is an assessment that is also designed as levels. Ryan and Ryan draw from the work of Bain et al.²⁸ Ryan and Ryan outline four levels labelled as reporting & responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing. A series of questions are outlined as prompts or descriptions for each level (see Table 5).

TABLE 5
Ryan and Ryan's 4R Reflection Scale (adapted from Bain et al)²⁹

Level	Description
Reporting & Responding	Describing an incident or experience.
Relating	Drawing a relationship between the incident with past experiences or concepts/theory in the profession.
Reasoning	Considering theory as well as ethical, social or political factors.
Reconstructing	Developing a plan to change future actions.

Source: Ryan, Mary and Ryan, Michael, "A Model for Reflection in the Pedagogic Field of Higher Education," In *Teaching Reflective Learning in Higher Education*, edited by Mary Elizabeth Ryan, 15–27, New York, NY: Springer, (2015), 25.

In Kember et al.'s Four Category Scheme there are four categories (habitual action, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection) that also acts as levels to differentiate between a weak and strong reflection.³⁰ The first category, habitual action, is not considered a reflection since the professional continues to repeat actions with no change. The second category, understanding, is also considered a weak reflection since it is merely a description of an event or concept with no analysis. The third category is reflection, whereby the professional connects their experience with theory in their field. The fourth category, critical reflection, draws from literature and research on critical pedagogy. A reflection that is considered critical would demonstrate a shift or transformation in one's own perspective or beliefs around teaching and learning. This means an analysis of one's own thinking through a critical lens that considers political, social or cultural factors.

The scales and frameworks presented are useful in assessing the overall summary of reflection as well as a way to fill in gaps in some of the reflective frameworks. For example, Gibbs' reflective cycle while comprehensive in stages, does not focus or prompt for a critical review or a socio-political lens of a reflection. The assessment frameworks can help turn a reflection into a critical reflection, thus, creating a shift or transformation in perspective on an incident or overall practice.

Implications

There are inconsistencies in educating and exploring and developing skills in reflective practice in the profession and in library and information science graduate programs. While some programs teach reflective practice in library management courses, some do not introduce the concept at all.³¹ While the act of reflection may seem engrained in our daily routine, meaningful reflections require training and education as demonstrated in other professional programs such as education, nursing and healthcare. While engaging in reflective practice requires time, it is a necessary part of the library and information science profession since we interact with people through our services and team work. Beyond the time required to engage in reflection, self-reflection may not always be successful and provide a skewed view of ourselves and incident. A major theme in the assessments for reflections was the need to review our own assumptions in reflections as well as the political, social and cultural factors that influence our perspective.

Brookfield presents a theory and method for becoming a critically reflective teacher that includes self-reflection as well as other lenses to ensure the reflection leads to a transformative learning experience.³² Brookfield promotes the development of empathy as the four critically reflective lenses encourage reflection through the view of multiple perspectives: ourselves, our students, our colleagues, and the theoretical literature (see Table 6). By encouraging reflection through different perspectives, assumptions of others involved in an incident or ex-

TABLE 6
Brookfield's Four Critically Reflective Lenses

Critically Reflective Lens	Example of a Strategy
Autobiography	Ideology critique
Students' Eyes	Course Evaluations
Colleagues' Experiences	Peer-to-Peer Conversations
Theoretical Literature	Research

Source: Brookfield, Stephen D, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 29–30.

perience can be removed and a more critical and objective analysis can be formed from it. Furthermore, Brookfield's Four Lenses examines practice and includes a category that connects experience with theory, thereby ensuring reflection on practice in the profession.

While Brookfield presents a helpful approach to critically examining teaching practices, it is important to note that reflective practice as well as the act of reflection is essentially learning. Brookfield emphasizes that reflection and the assessment of reflection should not be formalized in a work environment to ensure that professionals do not “measure how much reflection we have performed on any given day or how we score on a scale of reflective competence.”³³ Furthermore, the development of habits of reflection that lead to reflective practice should not be forced upon professionals, rather it should be a natural progression and desire prompted by professionals in their own time. The frameworks presented in this paper are not meant to be a prescription for developing skills in reflection. Many of the frameworks presented in this paper should be used as guides or a way to explore different ways of thinking that can be applied to our professional context and provide insight and transformation in the library and information science discipline.

Conclusion

While many reflection frameworks exist in structuring the reflective process, the complexities of library and information science work require further consideration such as the socio-political factors that influence our environment and work. Brookfield's approaches to becoming a critically reflective teacher offers insight from various perspectives that inform our actions. While reflection may seem like a daily process, a formalized approach can help encourage a deeper reflection that leads to an action plan. Moreover, a structured and recorded reflection ensures that we are accountable for our development and actions. An impactful reflection on library values, ethics and practices can help shift perspectives and bring about transformation to our environment, services and professional culture.

Notes

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