

Notes on Keeping a Reflective Journal

Andy Miller

OD Manager- People Skills

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What is knowledge?

This is so easy! Or is it?

Most of us *know* the nursery rhyme called Humpty Dumpty – it is taught to children up and down the country and tells of a big egg (Mr Dumpty) who fell off a wall and couldn't be re-assembled by either the royal personnel or the royal animals.

Humpty Dumpty

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's
men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

But is this true?

Scholars believe that this, like many nursery rhymes, has a more sinister past and actually refers to the siege of Gloucester in 1643, during the English Civil War. 35,000 Royalist troops (the "King's men") attacked Gloucester but the 1,500 Roundhead garrison troops had warning and locked the city down – the siege began. King Charles I instructed his favourite, Prince Rupert to take a massive, newly-built cannon (which had been nicknamed "Humpty Dumpty") from Bristol to break the siege. When the cannon arrived it was set up on a large wall and pointed directly at the cathedral. However, the gunners were unused to firing such a brand new, large weapon and misjudged the amount of gunpowder with the result that Humpty Dumpty blew up on its first firing – it was damaged beyond repair (the King's cavalry, or "horses" and the gunners could not "put Humpty together again"). While the siege was going on 15,000 Roundhead troops arrived from London and the city was saved but over 3,000 men were killed or wounded. The Royalists eventually lost the war and King Charles I was executed in 1649.

Now we know this nursery rhyme but we know it differently than we did before – our perception and knowledge has *changed*.

Knowledge is not just about knowing facts – it is all about putting those facts to work and using them in context. There are different levels of knowledge. There are even different types of knowledge. There is the knowledge about how to do a task in the laboratory but there is also the underpinning knowledge about why that task is performed in the first place or why that particular method, and not another methods is used to complete the task.

The different levels of knowledge

In 1956 an American educationist called Benjamin Bloom described six levels of knowledge – these levels (known as "Bloom's Taxonomy") are still being used today. These levels of knowledge, in rising complexity, are: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. Please note that Knowledge is actually the lowest level. The levels are described as follow:

- Knowledge the recognition and recall of information – describing events
- Comprehension interprets, summarises or translates given information – demonstrating an understanding of events
- Application the ability to use information in a situation other than the context in which it was learned
- Analysis the ability to separate a whole down into parts until relationships are clear – breaks down information

Synthesis	combines elements of knowledge together to form a completely new one – the ability to draw on information and experience to suggest new insights
Evaluation	involves acts of decision-making and judging based on criteria, knowledge and experience gathered from a wider field of experience

As you can see, once we get past Comprehension and into Application and above we can no longer depend on just knowing facts about a subject – we must learn how they interact with each other and which facts outside the immediate subject area to convert “knowing things” into “knowledge”.

When learning a subject it is useful to know what *level* of knowledge is required of us to learn to.

Once we get past Comprehension and into Application, Analysis and above we need to be able to manipulate the knowledge we have on a subject and apply it to different situations we may encounter. To do this we must understand how all the facts and rules we’ve learnt fit together into knowledge of the subject – this is where reflection comes in. We do it all the time in our head but to do it on paper and to make it a formal task (in the form of reflecting writing) makes the activity into a much more powerful learning tool.

Learning Strategies

Everybody has a different learning strategy whether it is a conscious decision or not. The three main strategies identified by academics are Deep Learning, Surface Learning and Strategic Learning.

Deep Learning	<p>The intention with deep learning is to <i>understand</i> ideas for ourselves – this is the type of learning which people who run courses want us to adopt.</p> <p>We relate new ideas to our current knowledge and see how they fit in and relate to everything else we know. We look for underlying patterns which we could apply to new situations. We become more interested in the subject.</p>
Surface Learning	<p>The intention with surface learning is to <i>cope</i> with the new ideas.</p> <p>We learn each new idea as a separate entity with the result that we don’t make links between related areas of knowledge – in other words we compartmentalise our knowledge. This approach works for small subjects but if we apply it to big subjects like university courses or courses at work we end up feeling pressured and worried because we have to learn each new idea from scratch.</p>
Strategic Learning	<p>The intention of strategic learning is to <i>achieve the highest possible grades</i> by trying to identify what we need to know to pass an exam or “get by” in the workplace.</p> <p>We learn the ideas which will make us “look good” either to the tutor, our supervisor or the examiner and ignore the “other stuff” (which may well be important ideas and knowledge). This is a popular strategy used by many university students.</p>

So our aim is to develop deep learning – learn around the topic and see how everything “fits together”, underlying principles which we can apply to different circumstances and how learning something new impacts on our understanding of other aspects of our knowledge both within the subject of study and outside it.

By now you may have guessed what this strategy is heading towards – reflective practice. A method of formally doing what we already do (to some extent) in our heads all of the time.

Reflective practice

To indulge in a formal process of reflective practice we are going to have to keep notes in some form or another. *How* you do this is not a problem, just the fact that you *do it* is important. Use the method most suitable for you. Here are *some* examples:

Notebook	The notebook or “reflective log” is probably the most common form of reflective practice. A notebook in which we can write your reflections and proposed actions on a regular basis. The strength of a notebook is that it keeps all of reflections in the order we’ve written them so that we can keep an eye on how much / how often we have made entries.
Lever-arch file	Keeping our reflections in a lever-arch file allows us to group our reflections on particular topics or to add / remove pages at will. It has the same strengths as the notebook.
Reflective log forms	Some people prefer to have a blank sheet of paper while others like to structure their reflective writings in a form – this makes it easier to find past writings or subject matters.
Computer files	Keeping our reflective writings as computer files makes them very transportable and reproducible. We can also use the computer to search for topics electronically and only print out entries when we need to. If privacy is required then we can password-protect our entries.
PostIt™ notes	PostIt™ notes or scraps of paper are really useful because we are more likely to do our reflections much more regularly and without having to find our logbook or file. The main problem with this approach is aesthetics and finding our reflections when we want to refer back to them.
Blogging	A modern way to keep a reflective journal is to keep a private blog (short for <i>web log</i>) which can be available to us wherever we can gain access to a computer with Internet access. We can “tag” our entries with words and phrases to keep them organised and find entries again and they will always be backed-up or saved by the company who provides the “blog community” websites.

Keeping a reflective journal

Nobody can *tell* us what we write in our reflective journals – our journals are *by* us and *for* us – we write what is useful or important to ourselves. However, other people may want to see our journals (people like the Health Professions Council or Clinical Pathology Accreditation or the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority) as proof that we / NHSBT are committed to learning and developing our skills, so keep them “legal, honest and decent”.

Now we sit with a blank page in front of us. What do we write?

Unfortunately there are no instructions on what should be written in a reflective journal – you need to write what is important or helpful to you, not what you think others want to read or what you think should be in a journal. To help here are some hints:

Focus on a specific event or issue for an individual entry – we need think about how we could address or resolve the issue, or what we'd like to improve.

There's no point in sitting down and deciding, "Now I am going to reflect!" – nothing will happen! A good starting point is an *event* – attending a course, reading an article or scientific paper, getting audited or doing an audit, a quality incident in the laboratory. It doesn't need to be a planned event or something which has been set up by somebody else – just something which has happened at a point in time.

Avoid descriptive writing, take an analytical approach

As scientists we are used to *describing* things – we are not used to exploring our own attitudes to things or our feelings about what happened. A descriptive account can be a very useful *starting point* for a piece of reflective writing – we need to write out what happened and then start putting in our opinions and feelings about what happened.

Use questions or prompts to help you focus on the task

We need to ask ourselves questions about what happened – how did it make us feel? Is there something we could have done better? Did the event show up strengths or weaknesses in our knowledge about a subject? If it did then what are we going to do about it? Why did we like / dislike something? Does this show us anything about how we learn or our attitudes to things? And so the list goes on – we don't have to answer a full set of questions on each event, just enough to make the reflection *worth* something. Some events will raise loads of questions which we can answer for ourselves while others will raise just one.

Include actions

This is really important – there's no point in going through events and reflecting upon them if we are not going to do anything about them! So include actions – what are we going to do to improve our lot, make the "good things" happen more often and the "bad things" happen less often / not at all? It is no good writing nebulous "Oh, I'll learn more about X" or "I need to understand Y better" because we won't do it. Think specific and time-specific. "I am going to enrol on X course on Y date" or "I am going to read chapter 4 of book Z by this date" are much more specific and much more likely to be done.

Write in your journal regularly, even if individual entries are sometimes short

"A little and often" is a very good rule when it comes to reflective writing. If we forget and are too busy for a while just forget about it and start writing your journal again. This is an exercise in reflecting upon things – not how good our memories are about events which occurred in the dim and distant past.

Use colour to make these more engaging and memorable

Colours make text more interesting. Highlighter pens draw our attention to important entries or actions. Diagrams are interesting to look at. A page of solid text in black is not! If something *looks* more interesting, then we are more likely to be interested in it and *use* it.

Review the entries that you've written to see if you can find key themes and recognise what longer-term action you might need to take (e.g. to improve a particular study skill)

Once we've got a decent number of entries we can start reviewing it and, perhaps, spot recurring themes. If we can spot these then we can suggest possible over-arching actions

which could remedy several problems at one go. Once we start doing this we are well on the way to the deep learning which was covered in the previous section.

This list is, by no stretch of the imagination, exhaustive but it does contain some ground rules or good practice which will make writing reflective journals easier. That said, the best way to get better at writing reflective journals is to PRACTICE – the more we do the better we get.

Some examples of reflection

This all sounds very good but what do we mean by it all? Some examples could help illustrate some of the concepts outlined in the previous section.

Below are four short examples of reflective writing written by four different people about the same event – a lecture by Andy Miller (the Training Manager) called “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall is NOT Reflective Writing”, given on 25 January 2011

Reflective Entry #1 – Eddie

Andy spoke for about 40 minutes about reflective writing.
He spoke about what reflection is and how to explore our knowledge.
He also gave us guidance on how to write reflective logs and what sort of format to use.
He also told us what sort of activity could constitute a learning event.
Eddie. 26 Jan 11

This is a typical scientist’s early reflective account – full of information about what happened and nothing else. This is a “log of events”.

Eddie needs to have a look at what Andy said and see if he agrees with it or not.

Are there any indications that Eddie has taken any of this on-board and is going to apply it to his work? No.

Reflective Entry #2 – Zaheda

Lecture given by Andy Miller - agreed with some bits, not with others:
Agreed - the need to do it for CPD, the fact that we have to learn how to do reflective writing as there is no escape from it
Disagreed - Our managers should not be able to view our journal - it is our writing for ourselves and not for anybody else!
Actions: Start a reflective journal and find out more about reflective practice.
Zaheda. 25 Mar 11

Zaheda has made a much better go of it.

She’s pointed out which bits she agreed with and which she did not – but it may be worth spending a bit of time in wondering (reflecting) why she has those opinions.

It is great to see some actions in there but they are very non-specific and she has not set herself any start dates so her chances of actually doing something about the actions is probably quite low. When is she going to start a journal and how is she going to find out more about reflective practice?

The date she wrote the entry is also worrying – Zaheda must have a very good memory!

Reflective Entry #3 – Sally

I went to a lecture yesterday lunchtime by Andy Miller about keeping reflective journals and I really enjoyed it - he told us all how to keep a journal and the benefits that it would give us. I can't ever see anything like this coming into my department though because of the manager - she always wants to see what we do and tries to change it. It's like in department meeting - she always gets together with Geoff to control the meeting. Geoff has lost a lot of weight recently - good for him but I think the breakup with his girlfriend didn't help much! If I was in charge I'd give everybody an hour or so a week to do their reflective journals as it might make them do it - the lazy ones like Ahmed and Kyle, I mean (they never do anything!). I would find a quiet place and point out all the stuff which had happened that week, then I'd go through and reflect on each bit - like how Kyle leaves all of the work for me to do etc. etc.

Well! Sally has gone for the "stream of consciousness approach" to reflective writing - she is just writing things down as they come into her head. She is also writing down a lot of (perhaps libellous) material which is inappropriate for a journal because it is about other people - the journal should be about Sally - other people may be mentioned, but only in passing.

There is some proper reflection in there too though - when Sally talks about what she would do if she were in charge and her musings about how she would approach keeping a reflective journal. There's nothing specific though - there are no ideas which look like Sally is going to follow through into actions.

Reflective Entry #4 – Taiwo

Well, what a waste of my ***** time that was! Andy Miller may have all the time in the world to sit around contemplating his navel in this sort of arty-farty twaddle but I haven't! He wants to get out of his ivory tower and come visit the real ***** world once and a while! What a ***! The only time I've got to do this would be when we're calibrating the machines - which is all done wrong anyway! I could do a much better job in half the time - in fact I'll go and tell the supervisor about my idea tomorrow morning - he'll have to see sense and change things. If I had a Biomedical Science MSc then I could be a supervisor but I'm too busy cleaning up the ***** they make with ***** stupid ideas (and so the rant continues)

Taiwo. 25 Jan 11

I think you'll agree that Taiwo is rather angry! Although he uses a lot of colourful language this entry is not as bad as it first appears. As Andy Miller is the training manager he may well want to see Taiwo's reflective journal - he may not like what he reads(!)

Taiwo has done quite a bit of reflecting in this entry - he's identified when he can do his reflection, what can be done to improve the calibrating of the machines and what studies he needs to become a supervisor. There's also some action in there - he's going to see the supervisor with his ideas tomorrow morning - that sounds like an action which he will do rather than those cited in the other examples.

So, apart from the foul language, Taiwo's is probably the best example of a reflective journal entry in these examples - he's explored his emotions, identified problems he can do something about and is starting to develop a strategy for the future.

We've had a look at four very short examples of reflective writing. They show some of the pitfalls of reflecting and some good and bad practices. There is no right or wrong way of writing journals either in style, content, method or frequency. The important part is that we **do** reflect on our work in some form!

Some side-effects of reflection

There are many benefits of reflective practice but some of the biggest ones are listed below:

You accept responsibility for your own personal growth

As we get more adept at reflective writing we become more and more aware of our own educational needs and start to take ownership of our own development. In this way our education and development become something **we do** rather than something which is **done to us**.

You see a clear link between the effort you put into your development activity and the benefits you get out of it.

Education and training can seem like a long slog – a part-time degree or MSc can go on for four years. By regularly reflecting we can see the progress we are making in our knowledge about a subject or our skills in a particular task. This incremental improvement once identified and examined through reflection, can become a very powerful motivating force giving us more enthusiasm in our studies and so giving us better grades.

You see more value in each learning experience, by knowing why you're doing it and what's in it for you.

We begin to understand much better why we are sent on that particular course rather than just turning up to make up the numbers, and so, will get much more out of the training we receive. Knowing exactly why we are on a course and what we want to get out of it before it starts usually means that we *will* get out of it what we want and we understand the benefits to ourselves of attending that course.

It helps you 'learn how to learn' and add new skills over time. Posh name: metacognitive skills

As we get better at reflecting we begin to see how we actually learn things – all of us learn differently – some like diagrams, others like talking concepts over with colleagues, some like lots of notes, others will “have a go” and learn as they go along. By reflecting we get to know which approaches work well for us and which don't – we improve our metacognitive skills. Put simply we understand “how to learn” better which makes our learning much more efficient.

One last piece of advice

HAVE A GO!