

## Chapter 2: Reflection and Learning from Experience<sup>1</sup>

*My journal has become a symbol of independence. It allows me the luxury of time to myself. The journal requirement for this class gave me permission to stop and spend some time on my thoughts. My family would consider journal writing self-absorbent, selfish and a waste of time. I had to overcome and reframe this mindset that has influenced me throughout my life. It was a slow process for me to change my attitude about the importance and utility of the journaling activity. I found that writing in my journal gave me justification to spend time focusing, venting or thinking metacognitively about different aspects of the semester. The professor said it well when she said, "writing is thinking."*

--Laura, returning graduate student

Before completing class assignments in her journal, Laura viewed journal keeping as "self absorbent." She has modified her prior assumption and now knows the power of journal writing. She connects writing, learning, and reflection. The theoretical foundation for journal writing lies in learning models that place reflection as a centerpiece in learning. Because of the connection between reflection, writing, and learning, we use the work of three well-known learning theorists: John Dewey, David Kolb, and Donald Schön, who all emphasize that reflection is a fundamental component in human learning and development.

Reflection is more than merely thinking or musing. Reflection is a complex and intentional intellectual activity that generates learning from experience. What kind of learning results from reflection? Dewey (1933), a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century educational philosopher, argues that reflective thinking builds the foundation for the furtherance of democratic principles. Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983) assert that reflection helps adults cope with and learn from ill-structured, complex problems in social settings and the workplace. If the potential results of reflective thinking are that adults develop positive democratic attitudes and practices and are more able to address problems in their social and professional lives, then as educators it is important for us to find ways to foster reflection...

### Three Leading Theoretical Perspectives on Reflection and Learning from Experience

*John Dewey (1859-1952): Experience, Reflection and Learning*

As the father of the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressive movement in education and an eminent philosopher, John Dewey's work is particularly helpful in defining and describing the relationships among experience, reflection, and learning, because faculty expect students to learn, especially the knowledge within their respective disciplines, reflection on course readings and field experiences is essential. Across a variety of disciplines, journals are a well-established way to record, reflect, and continue to learn from experience. John Dewey has defined what experiences are educative, how learning proceeds, and what role reflection plays in learning.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of chapter two from Dannelle D. Stevens and Joanne E. Cooper, *Journal Keeping. How to Use Reflective Writing for Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight and Positive Change*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing. 2009.

Dewey (1933) states that an *experience* is an interaction between the individual and the environment. An experience first includes more than participation in activities; experience could be reading a book, taking lecture notes, or talking with others. Secondly, an experience contains what Dewey referred to as *continuity*, a continuous flow of knowledge from previous experiences...

Learning, therefore, is a continuous and cumulative process. Prior learning becomes the fodder for further understanding and insight.

In his 1933 work, *How We Think*, Dewey distinguishes between four different modes of thinking: imagination, belief, stream of consciousness, and reflection. Dewey acknowledges that imagination, belief, and stream of consciousness are certainly part of our thinking activities, yet they do not necessarily contribute to learning and even less to lifelong learning. Reflection, however plays a different role. Dewey defines reflection as the

... active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. (1933, p. 9)

Reflection is active. When we reflect we examine prior beliefs and assumptions and their implications. Reflection is an intentional action. A “demand for a solution of a perplexity is the steady, guiding factor in the entire process of reflection” (Dewey, 1933, p. 14). Dewey adds

The function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious. (1933, p. 100)

Reflection starts with discomfort during an experience and leads a person to a balanced state. It takes time and focus to reach clarity of thought.

Dewey writes that reflection “gives an individual an increased power of control” (Dewey, 1933, p. 21). It “emancipates us from merely impulsive and merely routine activity...It converts action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action” (1933, p. 17). It is not enough just to have an experience. Reflection directs that experience to learning and deeper insights...

Reflective thinking takes time and requires one to engage in several different “phases” or “aspects” of reflective thought:

1. Perplexity: responding to suggestions and ideas that appear when confronted with a problem.
2. Elaboration: referring to past experiences that are similar.
3. Hypotheses: developing several potential hypotheses.
4. Comparing hypotheses: finding some coherence within these hypotheses
5. Taking action: experiencing “mastery satisfaction, enjoyment” when selecting and then acting on these hypotheses (Dewey, 1933, pp. 106-115)

Dewey asserts that these are not steps but aspects of reflective activity. An individual may stop at some point and find it necessary to go back and, for example, collect more experiences.

A key point is that informed action follows this reflective thinking process and leads to more ideas and therefore generates more experience on which to reflect. “Reflective thinking impels to inquiry” (Dewey, 1933, p. 7)...

In fact, to Dewey, reflective thinking fosters the development of three attitudes that further the “habit of thinking in a reflective way.” These three attitudes are:

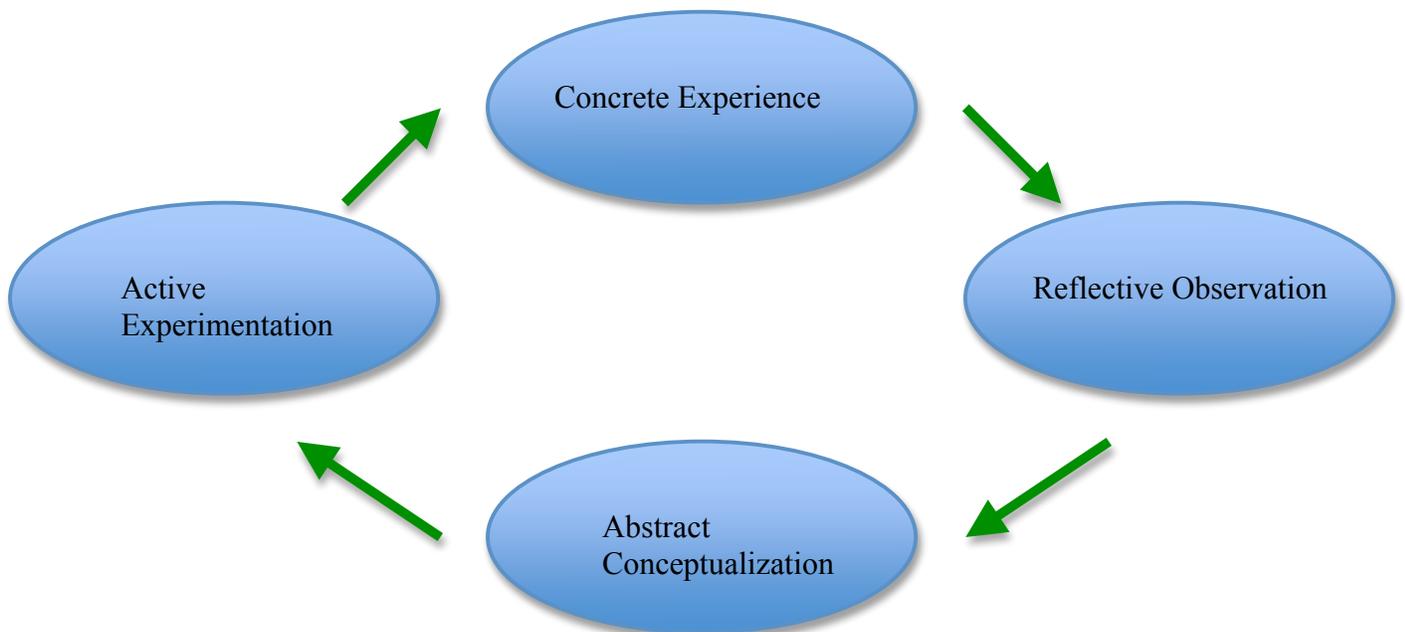
- Openmindedness (freedom from prejudice)
- Wholeheartedness or absorbed interest
- Responsibility in facing consequences (Dewey, 1933, p. 33)

These dispositions are the foundation for education that gives people “a personal interest in social relationships and control and the habits of mind that secures social changes without introducing disorder.” (Dewey, 1944, p. 99)...

*David Kolb (1939- ): Reflection and an Experiential Learning Model*

David Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning elaborates the process by which adults learn from their experience...Kolb’s model (Figure 2.1) illustrates the four stages of learning from experience: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

**Figure 2.1: Kolb’s Theory of Experiential Learning**



The first phase in the Kolb cycle—concrete, “real world” experience—means direct, practical experience that results in “knowledge by acquaintance” as opposed to “knowledge about” something. Concrete experience precedes reflective observation of that experience. The next phase, reflective observation, involves focusing on what that experience means and its connotations in light of past learning. In the third phase, abstract conceptualization, learners relate their reflective observations to what they already know: extant theories, preconceived notions, and embedded assumptions. During active experimentation, the last phase before the cycle begins again, the learner applies new concepts and theories to the real world.

For Kolb (1984), learning is a cycle that perpetuates more learning... Reflection is the engine that moves the learning cycle along its path to further learning, action, and more reflection. Without it, the learner is “stuck” in the experience without gaining any new understanding.

Kolb did not address journal writing per se as a reflective tool. Yet the journal offers a unique opportunity to chronicle and examine more closely and carefully our concrete experiences, and then to ask the hard questions about how these experiences relate to what is already known. When students or faculty keep a journal, they are capturing a concrete experience in a written form. During writing, journal writers can readily examine their concrete experiences, and even step back and reflect on how those observations might relate to other experiences. To extend the learning further, during abstract conceptualization the writing can be reread and analyzed for underlying assumptions and beliefs that contribute to positive outcomes... According to Kolb’s theory, then, journal writers can actively experiment with the ideas that motivate their actions and thus approach new experiences with fresh insights and the possibility for new learning...

...A journal is an appropriate location for documenting experience, generating reflections, and examining assumptions. Boyd and Fales further argue that reflective learning is the

...core difference between whether a person repeats the same experience several times, becoming highly proficient at one behavior, or learns from experience in such a way that he or she is cognitively or effectively changed. Such a change involves essentially changing his or her meaning structures. (1983, p. 100)

Kolb’s work elaborates a cycle of learning that leads to informed future action. Another theorist, Donald Schön, describes the power of two different kinds of reflection to develop expertise in professional practice fields such as education and medicine.

#### **D. A. Schön (1930-1997): Reflection and Professional Practice**

Schön (1983, 1987) was interested in how and when professionals use reflection to build professional knowledge and expertise. Schön’s work appeals to professionals who teach professionals because he distinguishes between the static knowledge found in textbooks and the dynamic, adaptive knowledge that the expert uses in clinical and professional settings. To bridge this gap, pre-service professionals need guided practice. Given the dynamic, complex, and unstructured settings in which professionals work, developing reflective capacity is essential.

Schön's initial work (1983) was geared toward those who educate professionals. He asserts that in the past, professional practice programs have delineated the profession's "espoused theories" to novices. Yet these theories may make sense in the textbooks but may not actually be applied in daily practice. The theories that guide daily decision making, the "theories-in-use," are contextually specific, idiosyncratic, and often not mentioned in textbooks of professional practice. Over and over again the theories-in-use are tested and developed to become proven, sometimes even unconscious, ways of performing. One of Schön's central concerns is how to help novices learn the theories used by experts in real life settings.

Schön describes two processes that contribute to the development of expertise: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Professionals reflect while they are engaged in an experience (reflection-in-action) and after an experience (reflection-on-action). In this process of reflection, novice professionals develop the theories-in-use that underlie competent, expert decision making.

For most professionals, the journal is a reflection-on-action zone allowing them to slow down the constant array of demands, scrutinize their actions, and determine whether their present activities contribute in the long run to their goals and desires. Thus the journal can become a place where professionals can develop the ability to identify tacit, unspoken knowledge that is not typically taught. Many professional preparation programs have relied on Schön's work to guide their use of journal-writing activities...

### **How Does Reflection Occur? The Action-Reflection-Action Cycle**

Reflection occurs in a cycle of action, reflection, and action. Dewey, Kolb, and Schön included reflection in at least one step in their theories on learning from experience. For all three, reflection is not isolated from experience; it is part of a cycle of learning and experiencing. Dewey described "aspects" of reflection. Kolb described "phases." Schön divided reflection into two parts: reflection "in" and "on" action. All include experience followed by reflection and the generation of hypotheses or experimental conclusions that are applied to further experience. For each, learning from experience requires shuttling back and forth from observations, to examination and reflection on those observations, and then acting on those conclusions. The more people reflect on action, the better they get at reflecting and the more they can learn about themselves...

### **Why is Reflection Worthwhile? Development of Valued Human Capabilities**

Through the development of reflective capacity and the habit of reflective thinking the student or professional achieves certain broader, more lasting outcomes as well. Dewey (1933) asserts that reflection is the foundation for democracy through developing the capacity for openmindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. Kolb's (1984) theory shows how important it is to assess our basic beliefs that may blind us to new knowledge. Finally, Schön's model (1987) leads the professional to becoming an expert...

## References

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