Becoming a reflective practitioner

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Introduction

Reflection and reflective practice are two of the key buzzwords in professional and education practice at present. But what exactly do we mean by these terms and how can we develop our capacity for reflection? This article focuses on how to become more reflective in your professional practice whether as a clinician or educator. In it we define what we mean by reflection, identify the key stages in reflective practice and outline the main reflective practice skills.

Reflection on current practices

Before bringing about a change to current practices, the clinician needs to reflect on what is currently being practiced and what changes are required. A key factor in determining whether change is needed is the ‘evidence base’ relevant to the situation under consideration.

One of the most difficult tasks for educators is to help learners to relate theory to practice and reflection is one of the most important factors in achieving this synthesis. Unless this link is made then simply reading up on the evidence base is of little practical value. ‘Evidence based practice needs to retain a practical focus and to build on reflective practice’ (1).

This process is referred to as ‘reflection on action’ that is, it takes place after an event. Another aspect to reflective practice is ‘reflection in action,’ a more immediate reflection that takes place during the action. (2,3,4)

Reflective learning is ‘the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective.’ (2) In the discussion process of reflection, stages or levels of reflection have been identified. Mezirow identified seven steps of reflectivity in hierarchy, however Atkins in her analysis of the literature found that the differences between authors’ accounts of the reflective processes are largely those of terminology, detail and the extent to which the processes are arranged in hierarchy. (2) She identified the following three key stages in the reflective processes:

Stages in reflective practice

1. **Awareness** - The first stage is triggered by an awareness of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. This may arise because of some situation or event which does not unfold in the way we would expect. For example there may be an unexpected negative outcome of a usually reliable treatment option or perhaps a strong emotional reaction on the part of a learner. Of course it is also possible for surprising positive outcomes to leave us wondering what is the reason for the event. Either way there is some ‘out of the ordinary’ experience which causes us to begin reflecting.

2. **Critical Analysis** - The second stage involves a critical analysis of the situation that leads to an examination of feelings and knowledge – a ‘thinking on your feet’ situation, based on experience in the decision making process or ‘reflection in action’. This means that when that feeling of inner discomfort is felt a change is immediately made to bring about a better result. It may also involve ‘thinking on action’ where the analysis may involve the generation of new knowledge requiring the process of critical thinking. This process entails ‘association, integration, validation and
appropriateness. It is at this point that we may start to look for the evidence base or ‘public propositional knowledge’ (5) which relates to the object of our enquiry. We may also want to talk with our colleagues and learn from their experience.

3. **New perspectives** - The third stage involves ‘the development of a new perspective on the situation.’ This means, moving from a position of a detached observer, to one of becoming involved. The model on the previous page represents the stages in reflective practice adapted from the text in Atkins (1993) (2).

**Reflective practice skills**
In order to become a reflective practitioner, the individual needs to acquire the skills of reflective practice, which are:

1. **Self awareness**
   An essential component of reflection is self awareness or the ability to analyse feelings. It involves an honest examination of how the situation has affected the individual and how the individual has affected the situation. This is not an easy task, especially in the heat and pressure of the moment when it can be hard to recall exactly what happened. Nonetheless we need to develop the capacity to do this if we are to become more effective in our reflection.

2. **Description**
   Description involves having the ability to recognise and recollect salient events. This might entail recalling similar signs and symptoms in patients presenting with a particular disorder, it might involve describing a new finding. The description might be verbalised in a group discussion, written in a clinical guideline, journal article or book, to enable learning through reflection.

3. **Critical Analysis**
   This involves examining components of a situation. This process entails examining existing knowledge, challenging assumptions, imagining and exploring alternatives. Imagining and exploring alternatives also encourages the creation of new ideas and inventiveness. A critical analysis also involves examining how relevant knowledge is to an individual situation. This aspect supports the definition of evidence based medicine where clinicians concentrate on the outcomes of their treatments for individual patients.

4. **Synthesis**
   This is the process of integrating new knowledge or experience and making it part of our ‘personal knowledge base’ (6). This knowledge is used in a creative way to solve problems and to predict the possible outcomes. This is particularly important as the outcome of reflection involves the development of a new perspective. However it may in fact endorse the continuance of a particular practice within a particular context weighed against other factors such as availability of resources and/or patient preferences.

5. **Evaluation**
   Evaluation is defined as the making of judgments about the value of something. It can also be defined as ‘to judge or assess the worth of something’. Both synthesis and evaluation are crucial to the development of a new perspective. (2) A decision would then have to be made as to whether a change in practice is necessary.

**Conclusion**
Self awareness, description, critical analysis and evaluation are important skills for reflection. Reflection itself is a complex but vital skill which is central both to the our capacity to learn from experience and to apply that learning to our professional practice.

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