



Joanne Abbott explores the different routes to successful reflection

# Reflection: learning from experiences, good or bad

In this series of CPD articles, we have explored what reflection is, how we can reflect and how the audit process can help improve our professional practice. In Parts 2 and 3, Haydn Dobby introduced Gibbs' reflective cycle (Figure 1) which, to recap, considers a cyclical journey of event consideration consisting of event description, feelings before and after the event, evaluation and analysis, conclusion and action plan.

Through a deeper look at some of the phases of the reflective cycle, together with an exploration of experiential learning and professional influences, this article aims to consider how both good and bad experiences can be seen as learning opportunities within the reflective process.

The route to qualification as a dispensing optician (DO) is, for the majority, undertaken via distance learning alongside employment in practice. This route gives the student DO the advantage of 'in-experience', immersive learning from the onset, a valuable bridge from the classroom theory to the real-world practical. This experiential learning structure (Figure 2) provides a platform for fostering life-long learning and personal and professional development, but as with any built structure, a sound foundation is required.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The workplace is not a neutral environment. There are many pre-existing factors, which can influence our professional behaviours such as traditions, corporate culture, peer interactions or working environment. These impact on the way we learn, act and professionally mature. A direct effect of not critically reflecting on and appraising practice experiences is that we may learn, imitate or foster undesirable habits without realising it<sup>1</sup>.

Very early on in my career in one of the first practices I was employed, a substantial amount of cyrex and latex lens inter-liner



Figure 1: The six stages of Gibbs' reflective cycle

was used by the glazing lab and dispensing staff when mounting lenses into spectacle frames. This was a practice I picked up by osmosis. Through watching my colleagues routinely resolve troublesome loose lenses in such a way, and by not questioning or reflecting on their actions, I acquired the less than desirable practice myself through imitation. I had assumed this was a normal practice and their bad habit quickly became my bad habit. My colleagues' actions had directly impacted my own professionalism without my conscious awareness.

The theorist, John Dewey, described in his early works the experiential learning cycle as a spiral, rather than a never-ending circle<sup>2</sup>. Much

like driving up the levels of a multi-storey car park, in-practice experiences provide a learning platform on each level. What has been learnt

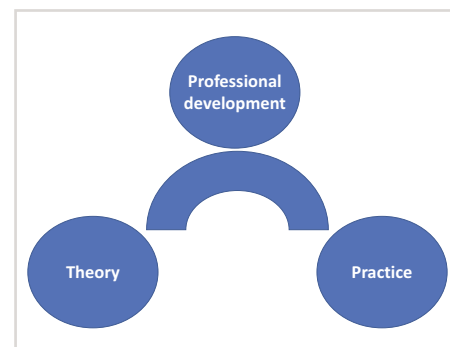


Figure 2: The experiential learning structure

LENS 1 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL	LENS 2 SUBJECT'S VIEW	LENS 3 COLLEAGUES' VIEW	LENS 4 THEORETICAL LITERATURE
The self-review lens	The view of the subject or patient	The view of our colleagues	The view as dictated by theory and literature
An exploration of your own emotions and feelings surrounding the experience. Consider how your current and past environment and experiences may have shaped reactions or responses.	Consider the experience through the patient's eyes, how would their past and present experiences affect their emotions and actions?	Through critical conversations (peer discussion) we can explore how a colleague would view the experience. Would their previous learning experiences lead to an alternative response?	Theory, literature, guidelines and evidence-based practice can provide guidance, a better understanding or new insight.

Table 1: Brookfield's four reflective lenses (adapted)

cannot be easily unlearned, and without the tools of critical reflection to question the assumptions of what we are learning along the way, it can be hard if not impossible to return to ground-level and question the path taken.

It takes the generation of discourse, a fundamental questioning of actions and beliefs, and the ability to look at things from different perspectives, to act as a catalyst to change the way in which we work.

### REFLECTIVE MODELS

Reflection is a learning tool without a formal curriculum or agenda. It is an informal source of experiential, self-led evaluation, analysis and learning, and can be difficult to initiate without an underpinning knowledge of what reflection actually is. Reflection is much more than just a review process; only true critical reflection can bring about change in behaviour to assist future practice<sup>3</sup>.

To assist in critical reflection, there are many different reflective models. One that as opticians we can easily relate to is that of Stephen Brookfield's four reflective lenses<sup>4</sup>. Although originally intended as a tool for the reflective teacher, Brookfield's model can be adapted and adopted to critically assess workplace experiences in the exploration and analysis phases of Gibbs' reflective cycle.

The model advocates the use of four different lenses to view events from different perspectives in that we may learn from our experiences, good or bad, by questioning our assumptions, actions and beliefs. **Table 1** gives a description of each



Figure 3: Reflective journals can help build a picture of experiences

lens alongside guidance notes, adapted from Brookfield's original model.

Many theorists and reflective teachers advocate the use of a reflective notes or journals – a self-led narrative and reflective account of workplace experiences (**Figure 3**). It works in much the same way as a CET reflective learning statement, which helps us to make sense of the learning or peer discussion CET sessions we have participated in and how the experience may affect our future practice. The ABDO CET reflective learning statement is somewhat structured to aid the practitioner in the reflection process.

Starting with a blank piece of paper can be daunting. Moon<sup>5</sup> suggests creating a reflective journal with predetermined sections or prompts to aid narrative flow. These prompts could be the phases of Gibbs' reflective cycle (**Figure 1**), or the four different lenses of Brookfield's reflective model, (**Table 1**), or based on the headings from the ABDO reflective learning statement.

Together, reflective journal entries build a picture of our experiences and can offer insight into how our actions and assumptions change. They can provide helpful anecdotal reminders of a situation or experience, and can reinforce personal strengths or weaknesses<sup>6</sup>.

Journal entries can be used as a basis for peer discussion with colleagues within Brookfield's four-lens reflective model or, with more detailed anonymised notes, be used as a basis for registrant-led peer review scenarios and team learning opportunities.

Reflective journal entries can be used to identify learning and self-directed development needs, based on your own practice – an element that Marcus Dye, General Optical Council head of standards and CET, believes is essential in becoming an effective reflective practitioner<sup>7</sup>.

Learning and development needs can be used to build a personal development plan (PDP). The ABDO Business Hub, accessible to members via the ABDO website, offers an insight into the use of a PDP and a plan template that can be downloaded free of

charge by ABDO members under the sub-section Teams.

### SUMMARY

- Reflection should be of both good and bad experiences – both are valuable learning opportunities
- Reflective cycles, models and templates can be used to aid reflection
- Reflective notes or journals can be used to keep track of experiences and reflections
- Reflective journals can be used to identify self and team learning opportunities
- Remember that reflection is a cyclical, continual process

### REFERENCES

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*In next month's CPD article we will hear from some members' experiences of CPD events.*