

Reflective Review

What is reflection

A 'common-sense' approach to reflection suggests that it lies somewhere around the notion of learning. We reflect on something in order to consider it in more detail eg 'Let me reflect on that for a moment'. Usually we reflect because we have a purpose for reflecting – a goal to reach. Sometimes we find ourselves 'being reflective' and out of that 'being reflective', something 'pops up'. Then there has been no conscious purpose as such – but there is a useful outcome and there may have been a subconscious purpose. It is also apparent that we reflect on things that are relatively complicated. We do not reflect on a simple addition sum – or the route to the corner shop. We reflect on things for which there is not an obvious or immediate solution. Often the latter will be instigated by or associated with a range of feelings and the experience of such reflection may be emotional or spiritual. The experience may be pleasurable or uncomfortable.

Generally reflection is a means of working on what we know already and it generates new knowledge. Consciously or unconsciously we put into the reflection process thoughts, ideas, experience, knowledge, theory and we may seek new information. We draw out of it something that accords with the purpose for which we reflected or new prompts for further reflection. On this basis, a simple definition of reflection might be:

Reflection is a form of mental processing that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to gain a better understanding of relatively complicated or unstructured ideas and is largely based on the reprocessing of knowledge, understanding and possibly emotions that we already possess.

Reflection has a role in:

- academic and non-academic learning
- self development
- critical review
- considering our own processes of mental functioning
- decision-making
- emancipation and empowerment and so on.

There is a close relationship between reflection and emotion or feelings and many would suggest that the use of reflection in a leadership context provides an appropriate channel for exploration or expression of this human function. Self-awareness and control of emotions is an important factor in leadership performance and personal development planning provides opportunities for emotional engagement with subject learning.

Reflection and learning

Reflection is not just an 'add-on-extra' to Peak Leaders training, but it is an essential component of good quality learning and the representation of that learning. Reflection seems to be a part of the kinds of learning in which learners try to understand material that they encounter and to relate it to what they already knew. Relating new material to what one knows already may mean reflecting on what one knows and modifying it (deep approach). Reflection will also be involved in the process of representing learning – when, for example, a learner's understanding is tested in a format that demands reprocessing of the ideas (eg an essay). It is less or uninvolved in an approach that requires reiteration of the responses in the same format as the original knowledge. So reflection is a fundamental feature of a deeper approach to learning.

In addition to being a part of good quality learning, reflection also supports learning by providing the right conditions for learning. For example:

- being reflective slows down learning, because it requires time for a learner to reprocess ideas.
- it enables learners to feel that they 'own' their knowledge and understanding because they have been a part of its creation.
- ability in reflection often implies ability in metacognition – where the learner is able to consider his/her own learning behaviour, metacognitive ability is associated with effective learning.
- material on which we reflect is relatively complicated or unstructured material. It challenges learners and when they are challenged, they gain greater abilities in dealing with difficult material of learning.

This description of the reflective review process is very largely based on a paper produced by Jenny Moon, University of Exeter.

References.

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