

Chapter 5

Recording and Assessing Reflection

INTRODUCTION

Many students and award candidates find reflective writing a major struggle and often produce highly descriptive work that is not of a reflective nature. This section therefore explores what is involved in producing reflective and analytical accounts of practice that provide clear evidence of competence in relation to reflective practice. Before looking at what is involved in the actual recording of reflective practice, we first briefly explore *why* and *when* to write reflective accounts. As with any piece of written work, or indeed any piece of work, *why* we are doing it will inform what we need to do and how we need to do it (Thompson, 2003). Furthermore, the value we accord it will influence how much time we devote to it.

Following these discussions, we go on to highlight some of the main characteristics of a good reflective account, whether it be in the form of a reflective log, learning diary or a portfolio of evidence for an award. The final section focuses more specifically on the assessment of reflective practice and, because it contributes towards making assessment processes more transparent, the discussion and guidelines should be just as useful to those being assessed as they are to those doing the assessing.

WHY WRITE REFLECTIVE ACCOUNTS?

There are many reasons for recording reflection, and you can probably come

up with more than the brief selection that we have highlighted as being, in our opinion, particularly relevant.

Continuous professional development

Revisiting, reviewing and evaluating our work opens us up to the possibility of learning from both our mistakes and our successes. Reflective accounts, whether shared with others or written in our own format and for our eyes only, provide an example of what Allen, Bowers and Diekelmann (1989) refer to as 'writing-to-learn'. Regardless of any external requirements or 'push factors', taking the initiative in this way can be a stimulating experience, in that it has the potential to provide new insights and also consolidation of previous learning. Jasper's chapter on journals and diaries in Bulman and Schutz (2004) supports this comment and contains some very useful advice on the structuring of learning journals in particular.

Voice of experience 5.1

I've had quite a few articles published in professional journals over the years. Some people ask me where I find the time, but I've always made time for it. It makes me step back from the coalface for a bit and think about what I'm doing and whether I'm making any impact. It's so easy to get sucked into the minutiae.

Irene, a ward manager

Accountability

In any profession there will be issues of accountability to consider, be it to those using, managing, funding or overseeing a service. Having written records that document the reflective processes behind decision making can be invaluable in situations where we are called to account for some reason.

Registration requirements

Increasingly, members of the helping professions are being required to make an ongoing case for being considered fit to practise. Reflective accounts can provide evidence to support that case.

Professional credibility

Opening up our practice to the scrutiny of others invites challenge and fosters the growth that can develop from constructive criticism. It can also help to challenge inaccurate stereotypes or assumptions and contribute to making the overall perception of a profession a positive one.

Assessment purposes

Where there is a need to prove competence, especially in terms of being able to practise independently, reflective accounts provide crucial forms of evidence. Especially where portfolios are concerned, the assessment process itself will usually come under scrutiny from an external examiner or assessor whose role it is to help ensure that the process is fair and consistent across a profession. Because an assessor can be called to account for the decisions he or she makes, there has to be demonstrable written evidence in a portfolio to support any assessment of competence that he or she makes.

Practice focus 5.1

It was Greta's first week in her new job after qualifying and she was thinking about how she would fit all of her new responsibilities into a working week. While she was a student she had been required to keep a learning diary so that she could provide evidence that she was practising in a reflective way but, as her workload was expected to increase over the next few weeks, she was glad that she no longer had to make time for it. However, it didn't take long for her to realize how crucial to her learning that process had been and that taking the time to reflect on what had gone and plan for what was to come was vital to her continuing development within the post and the profession. By the third week she had resumed her diary and, each Friday afternoon, she turned off her phone, asked her colleagues not to disturb her and spent the final half-hour of the day reminding herself of what she had learned and had left to learn. Whenever she felt under pressure to use that time for other matters she reminded herself of how unconfident and directionless she had felt in those first few weeks when she had just 'gone with the flow'.

WHEN TO WRITE REFLECTIVE ACCOUNTS

It is not for us, as authors, to be prescriptive about the best time for recording reflection. As we have already seen, reflective practice is not about having arbitrary

rules, but about managing our time and commitment to best effect in our own unique circumstances. What follows are just a few points to consider.

Managing time and energy

It may seem obvious to say that the best time is the time that works best for the individual concerned, but it really is a matter of writing when we feel best equipped to do it well – and that will vary from person to person. So, for example, for some people a task requiring clear thinking and concentration is best undertaken before a working day begins, while for others it may become easier to concentrate when other priorities have been dealt with, or during time away from the workplace.

A workable schedule

Again, this is a matter of what works best for each individual, but we would suggest that 'as soon as possible' is a good maxim to adopt. It may be difficult to find the time and energy to make entries in a reflective diary or other such record on a daily basis, although some people find that working in 'bite-size chunks' does work for them. For others, a weekly or monthly programme might work better and some find that a regular and significant event, such as a mentoring or supervision session, serves to focus them on reflection. What matters most is that the process of reflection is regular and consistent, so that it becomes a work habit rather than a one-off or occasional exercise.

Investing the time

Where there are competing demands on time, it is inevitable that some tasks will lose out to others that are given priority over them. The amount of time we invest in recording reflection will therefore be affected by the value we attach to it. A cost-benefit analysis would help to establish whether it is an effective use of time, but we hope by now that we have already convinced you that investing time in the short term will prove beneficial in the longer term. In terms of investment of time, an important factor to consider is how the task is conceptualized. Where finding the time, or the writing process itself, are considered to be chores, then they are more likely to be deferred to other

perceived priorities but, if a journal or account is perceived as an aid to practice, rather than a hindrance – in effect, the ‘companion’ that Ghaye and Lillyman (2006) refer to – then it will be seen as a good investment of time. The reconceptualizing of writing projects as a productive use of time is explored in some depth by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001), and we recommend having a look at their ideas – especially if committing time to reflection is a problem.

EXPECTATIONS OF REFLECTIVE ACCOUNTS

In this section we explore what it is that constitutes a good reflective account. The following list of features is not a comprehensive one and we would urge you, as always, to read what other commentators on the subject have to say. These particular points have been chosen because they are among those most often commented on by assessors as lacking in work submitted as evidence of competence. As an aid to understanding, for each of the points discussed, two versions of an account of practice are given. In the first of these (Account A) the particular feature will be lacking, but will be more evident in the second version (Account B).

There is an expectation that a reflective account will have each of the following elements.

An analytical content

Analysis differs from description in that it adds an extra dimension. Descriptive accounts merely give a straightforward account – they tell us about what happened, what a person did or said. But analytical accounts do something extra with that information – they ask questions of it, such as:

- Why was that done?
- What might have happened had the timing been different?
- Was it inevitable that it would end in that way?
- Could things have been done differently? With what effect?

An analytical account will not just mention facts, perceptions and events, but go on to draw links between them, consider alternatives approaches and

consequences, explore the beliefs and ideologies that underpin them and so on. You may find it useful to think in terms of the difference in focus between a television drama and a documentary. A drama recounts the story it is concerned with. A documentary, by contrast, goes a step further by not only recounting the story (in summary form at least), but also providing a commentary on it, the significance of certain issues, the recurrence of themes, the inter-connections across different elements – in other words, an analysis. Reflective accounts, then, should be more like documentaries than dramas.

Cottrell also offers important comment:

Analytical writing is writing that looks at the evidence in a detailed and critical way. In particular, it weighs up the relative strengths and weaknesses of the evidence ... so that it is clear how the writer has arrived at judgements and conclusions.

(2005, p. 168)

The following short paragraph is an example of a descriptive account of a practice situation.

Account A

Last Tuesday I visited Christa because she had rung the office to say that she had been made homeless. The duty officer had told her I would do the visit that same day because it was an emergency, but I was too busy, and so I arranged to go a few days later. When I got there she was sitting outside her flat in a very distressed state and so I took her to a café and bought her a cup of tea to calm her down while I made an appointment for her at the housing department. When I left to go Christa got angry with me because I hadn't sorted out her housing problem. I left her there and went back to the office.

After reading this account we know something of what happened last Tuesday, but nothing about, for example, why this worker did what they did, whether other options had been considered, or what they saw their role as being. The following account has more of an analytical edge to it.

Account B

Last Tuesday the duty officer asked me to visit Christa because she said she had been made homeless. I questioned whether we had enough information to judge whether this was an emergency or not and, on further analysis of the facts available, deferred the visit until I had more time to devote to it and she was better able to think clearly about her future plans now that she had been given notice to leave the flat within the next few weeks. I tried to persuade her to contact the housing department herself because I considered her competent to do so and it would reinforce the assertiveness skills we had been working on, but decided that my own measured approach and good working relationship with the housing department might be more effective in this particular case. Christa was angry with me, because she had expected the problem to be resolved there and then and, while I could understand how frustration and uncertainty had contributed to this heightened state of emotion, I made it clear that it was unhelpful behaviour on her part. We arranged to meet again soon and I returned to the office to consider whether I had played a part in her outburst by not making it clear from the outset that I had no power or even responsibility to allocate housing.

We now have much more of an insight into the situation and the worker's part in that than the first version gave us. It shows us, for example, that this worker is aware of the impact of his or her actions or inactions and that there was a commitment to empowerment and partnership underpinning practice. While Account B is not perfect, as no account will be beyond improvement, it is never the less a significant improvement on A.

Practice focus 5.2

Jonah had been asked to write a reflective account of some recent work he had undertaken in practice, so that he could discuss it with his fellow students on a study day. He had spent a long time on it and so was disappointed when, after asking a colleague to have a look at it, the response was that it needed, in his opinion, to have more depth. When Jonah responded by saying that he had tried to make it as detailed as possible and couldn't see what else he could do, his colleague expanded on his earlier comment by saying that depth and detail were not the same thing and suggested that he think about the purpose of the exercise before doing any revision of his report.

When he did so, he realized that his account, while interesting in itself, would not give his fellow students or his tutor any insight into why he did the work or whether he learned anything as a consequence. When he had reworked his account, the descriptive detail was minimal but the discussion element had increased dramatically. Jonah was surprised to see that the finished account was actually shorter than the original, but was confident that the quality was better. While initially disappointed by the response, he realized that his colleague had done him a favour by criticizing his work in this constructive way.

A critical edge

This is about not taking things for granted. As we noted in Chapter 1, a critical approach is a questioning one, one that 'unpacks' assertions, rather than taking them on board without further thought. For example, there is a 'common sense' view that the loss of a child brings parents closer together. However, Riches and Dawson (2000) present evidence to show that the separation rate is higher, rather than lower, amongst grieving parents. Critical writing shows an awareness of competing perspectives and an understanding that there is rarely a definitive 'right' approach or perspective. At this point, it is worth re-emphasizing Christenson's (2001) argument (quoted in Chapter 2) that a society that wishes to develop creativity also needs to encourage criticism. This is because, if we cannot question our approach and the assumptions on which it is based, we will not realize that there are alternative, possibly better, approaches that we could adopt.

Seeing beyond the worldviews that we acquire as a result of our socialization within a particular culture is not always easy (see the discussions about worldviews in Doel and Shardlow, 2005, and Moss, 2005), but we have to look inwards to our own assumptions as well as those of other people if our written accounts are to be truly reflective.

Consider the differences between the following paragraphs:

Account A

There had been a report of a disturbance down at the youth centre. A local resident had got in touch with me and, as I was the caretaker of the youth club, I made it my business to get involved. I expected there to be trouble, so I let the police know about the situation in case it turned into a full-scale riot. By the time I got

down to the centre there was a crowd of teenagers and everyone was shouting and running wild. While waiting for help to arrive I used a loudspeaker to try to tell them that we weren't going to do anything unless they calmed down and stopped fighting. However, after I got shouted down for the third time and saw a fire being lit I decided to leave it to the police to deal with. After all, it was a law and order issue.

The following account of the same episode, written by the youth leader, shows evidence of critical reflection:

Account B

I was called out to help deal with what was happening at the youth centre. It was described to me by the person who rang me as a 'disturbance' although, to be fair, it would have to have been on a colossal scale to have disturbed anyone, given its location on the empty former industrial estate. When I got there I was alarmed to see a fairly large police presence, as I hadn't realized that things were that serious. And when I negotiated with the police that I go into the building with just one officer I realised that they weren't actually as serious as I had been led to believe. Once I had got everyone to quieten down it became clear that some of them had broken in because they had seen flames and that the shouting and confusion were caused by panic and the fear that they would be blamed for the fire because of stereotypes about a 'typical' teenage lack of respect. Once the police officer had liaised with the fire service and taken witness statements to help with investigations into how the fire was started, everyone left. As I locked up I decided to make sure that the bravery of these young people received acknowledgement in some form, as I was concerned, in the light of the current negative representation of teenagers in the media, that their role might be misrepresented in the reporting of this event.

In the second account, there is evidence that this worker's practice incorporates critical reflection, whereas there is no indication in the caretaker's report that he or she had considered anything beyond their own perspective – that is,

it was reported as 'fighting' and 'a law and order issue'. As such, Account A is underpinned by a judgemental attitude, while Account B demonstrates an understanding of the dangers of taking events at face value and not adopting a critical, questioning approach.

Evidence of conceptual thinking

When we write, we do so for a purpose and, for many of those purposes, it is enough to write at a purely descriptive level. When we are planning the route for a day out in the car, say, we do not necessarily think in terms of geographical mobility or the social construction of leisure – we just want a reminder of where to leave the motorway. However, there are times when we do need to think about matters at a different level – that of concepts, rather than simply facts. Reflecting this level of thinking in our writing indicates that we are able to step back and see the bigger picture, the context in which we are operating. If we describe something we have done or seen, then others can surmise something about our observational and descriptive skills from that example. However, if we can comment on what our example is an example *of*, then it indicates a more in-depth level of understanding and analysis.

So, for example, a news report might begin with a description of localized flooding and move on to show interviews with people who have had to move out of their now uninhabitable homes. As such, these examples remain descriptive but, if the report moves on to discuss possible causes and implications, then a conceptual level of analysis is introduced. That is, there will be discussion about what this event is an example *of* – inadequate flood planning, population relocation, disenfranchised loss or whatever. Where this level of analysis is present in reflective accounts, it is a good indicator that the person writing it appreciates the need to account for the context, or rather contexts, in which he or she practises.

Consider the following account which is written in a fairly descriptive way:

Account A

As a nurse, I have been required to work to a rota which includes night shifts. I didn't expect this to be a problem as long as I could get the same amount of sleep as I would when working during the day and sleeping at night. However, I think that my practice has

suffered because of it. Last week, for example, I found myself referring to a patient by the wrong name and failed to notice that another patient had gone missing from the ward. I resolved to get more sleep but, even though I did so, I still felt tired. In work everything seemed to take twice as long to do, especially as I often had to call on a colleague to check things out because I recognized that my concentration wasn't as sharp as it should have been. I asked a friend who had worked on the night shift for years how I could adapt. He said that he hadn't had a problem when he was regularly working nights, but had experienced similar problems since being required to move between day and night shifts on the new rota. This conversation made me feel better.

As such, it documents an experience but does not provide any evidence to suggest that the person writing the account understands what his or her experience is an example of. The way in which Account B is written is not just a 'fancier' way of describing the same situation – it moves the writing on to a different level which adds something extra. For example, the use of concepts, such as resource management and sleep deprivation, provides some indication that this person can locate individual experiences in a wider context and appreciates conceptual links:

Account B

As a nurse, I have been required to work to a rota which includes night shifts. I didn't expect this to be a problem as long as my usual sleep patterns were not disturbed by the irregular work cycle that had been introduced by the Trust as a new measure. I was aware that there is a link between irregular shift patterns and sleep deprivation, but didn't think it would affect me too much. However, I think my practice has suffered as a consequence. Last week, for example, my recall and observational skills became impaired on a number of occasions. At the time I assumed that my failure to adapt was the problem but, after sharing experiences with a friend, I began to see the bigger picture. Maybe this wasn't about me and other individuals being poor copers, but about poor human resource management and insufficient research into the links between shift patterns and concentration levels. After talking to him I felt less inadequate and developed a heightened awareness of the organizational context of my practice.

An appreciation of one's own role in change processes

As we have noted, central to reflective practice is self-awareness. In the helping professions we often use ourselves as a means to promote change. That is, it is something that we do or say, or the way we do or say it that makes a difference. For example, when someone is faced with a serious loss or a frightening change of circumstances, the fact that we validate their experiences as traumatic, thereby giving them 'permission' to have strong emotional reactions, can make a very positive contribution to their being able to cope. But, as Thompson comments, if we use tools we need to understand them:

In working with people, our own self or personality is often used as a tool, a means by which positive change can be facilitated. This is perhaps the most obvious reason for encouraging self-awareness – using a tool without knowing what it is or how it works can hardly be seen as a wise basis for practice.

(2002, p. 3)

As people working with people, it is inevitable that we will have an impact on the dynamics of any situation and, without recognition of this, any written account of practice will be missing an important dimension in terms of reflective content. As with the previous points, the difference between the following two accounts should help to highlight what is expected in a reflective commentary:

Account A

When I heard the news that Donald's wife, Sharida, had died I went to see him as soon as I could manage. I had been Sharida's care manager for several years and knew how difficult it had been for both of them as Sharida's chronic condition took its toll on her health. I was aware that the funeral arrangements were being taken care of by a relative, but I was worried about how Donald would cope afterwards. I realized that his role as a full-time carer had impacted on his social network and that he had grown apart from many of his former friends. On my next visit I took along the details

of several clubs and societies which I thought might tempt him to socialize again, but found that he was reluctant to do so. I wondered whether a support group for bereaved carers might help, but he just became upset when I broached the subject. I thought he would have welcomed it.

Account B

When I heard the news that Donald's wife, Sharida, had died I went to see him as soon as I could manage, having made sure that he was ready to receive visitors. I had been Sharida's care manager for several years and knew how difficult it had been for both of them as Sharida's chronic condition took its toll on her health. I was aware that both of them had faced multiple losses, including the cancellation of their long-planned retirement trip to Sharida's home country. Donald seemed to cope quite well with the physical demands of his role as carer but not the emotional ones and so I had always made time to ask about his feelings and to reassure him that they were only to be expected in the situation he was facing. I had come to know Donald as a resilient person and felt sure that he would be able to rekindle old friendships and make new ones once he had given himself time to grieve after Sharida's death, but I felt I still had a role to play in helping him come to terms with his feelings of loss, even though I knew I could not take the pain away. When I evaluated my input into this case I thought about whether I had achieved what I had set out to achieve – and I had. My aim had been to help Donald and Sharida to understand what was going on in their lives and to reassure them that their 'anticipatory grieving' was a well-documented and healthy response (Corr, Nabe and Corr 2006) and not at all 'weird and unnatural', as some people had described it. It became clear from Donald's comments after the funeral that my insight had been a key factor in his coping strategy.

In the first of these accounts the writer seems to perceive him- or herself as simply a 'signpost' to other services. The second, however, demonstrates an awareness of how one's own knowledge, skills and values can constitute very effective tools in themselves.

An awareness and understanding of complexity

The world of the helping professions is full of ambiguities and uncertainties which make it virtually impossible to predict outcomes or prescribe the 'right' answer or approach – not that this stops some people trying to do so! As we have seen, reflective practice is about rising to the challenge of dealing with complexity, rather than trying to find the nearest acceptable match between a problem and an existing, ready-made solution. Experience equips us with evidence that some approaches have worked well in some circumstances and that it might be worth bearing this in mind rather than 're-inventing the wheel' on each occasion. But, it should not obscure the unique complexities within each new situation.

Responding to a problem as if it has just one dimension is an example of 'essentialism', a term which refers to the tendency to explain behaviour in terms of fixed qualities or 'essences'. An example of essentialism would be the assumption that all violent crimes carried out by women are caused by the effects of hormonal imbalances on behaviour. An anti-essentialist response would argue that, while hormonal imbalance might be a factor in some cases, it would not be the only factor in those cases, nor might it even be a factor at all in other cases. In each case of murder there could be any number of possible factors to take into account, such as domestic violence, poverty, mental health problems, jealousy, revenge, pity and so on.

There is an expectation, therefore, that a good reflective account will demonstrate an understanding of the complexity and uncertainty that characterizes work in the helping professions. We can see that the following account is lacking in this respect:

Account A

As part of my course I spent some time shadowing a worker at a refuge for women trying to escape from domestic abuse. As I got to know some of the women better, I noticed that there were similarities in their personality and behaviour. They were all really disorganized and, once they have settled in at the refuge, they didn't seem to want to do anything to help themselves. I was only going to be there for a couple of weeks, so I was keen to be as helpful as I could while I was there, but no-one seemed interested in getting themselves onto the refuge's resettlement programme. Having read

about 'victim behaviour', I'm pretty sure that this was what was happening here. And, if they lived their lives in this way, they were probably inviting their partners to be abusive. It must be frustrating to live with someone who can't seem to organize themselves or their lives and expects someone else to solve their problems for them. I learned a lot about psychology during those two weeks.

By contrast, this account does not make the same mistake:

Account B

As part of my course I spent some time shadowing a worker at a refuge for women trying to escape from domestic abuse. As I got to know some of the women better, I noticed that there were similarities in their personality and behaviour. They were all really disorganized, but I could see that this was only to be expected, given that they had all probably had to leave home in a hurry. Maybe some of them had planned this well in advance though, and it was only because they had such good organizational skills in the first place that they had managed to get out of the abusive situation relatively safely? I wondered whether I could have been 'organized' in that tiny room at the refuge when I had all those mixed feelings running through my head: Was I really safe here? What would happen now? Would I ever feel safe again? Will I have enough money to live on? I wanted to help, but found that my offers were not welcome. At first I took it personally but, on reflection, realized that it was probably a matter of poor timing. Perhaps some of the women weren't ready to think of moving forward yet, because they were still thinking about what they had lost. I had read about 'victim behaviour' and wondered whether this had any bearing on the situations I was witnessing. Maybe it was a factor in some cases, but I couldn't accept that it was universal or that a particular way of behaving could cause or legitimize abuse. I wondered whether the experience of domestic violence would have robbed me of my confidence and skills too. I learned a lot about domestic violence in those two weeks and a lot about myself. I would not allow myself to be seduced by simplistic reasoning – people's problems are never simple because people are complex and they live multifaceted lives.

We can see that Account A has been written in a very dogmatic way, with her perspective being presented as the 'true' one and underpinned by the assumption that a complex phenomenon (in this case domestic violence) can be explained by just one factor (the way in which some women behave). The second account demonstrates a far more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of human life.

It is to be hoped that our comments here, combined with the contrasting examples given, will paint a helpful picture of what is needed to produce genuinely reflective writing that is not simply descriptive. We now turn to the issue of assessing reflective accounts. This discussion should cast some additional light on writing reflective accounts. We therefore recommend that you read the next section, even if you are not involved as an assessor of reflective accounts.

ASSESSING REFLECTIVE ACCOUNTS

The role of an assessor or examiner is to ensure that an account which claims to, or is required to, demonstrate evidence of reflective practice actually does so. It should come as no surprise, then, that much of what follows in this section is informed by the discussion in the previous one. There would be little point in revisiting that material here other than to reiterate the point that such evidence, when presented in reflective accounts, needs to be explicit rather than implicit if an assessor or examiner is to be able to use it as an indicator of success. If part of what constitutes reflective practice is being clear about what we are trying to achieve and whether we have achieved it, then an account which requires the assessor to work out the implications for him- or herself is unlikely to be convincing evidence.

We would hope that the expectations outlined in the previous section will provide a good foundation from which to develop in terms of assessing reflective practice. What follows are some further thoughts on what might indicate that a person's practice has the 'mindful' basis expected of a reflective practitioner.

When examining a portfolio or other form of reflective writing, then, we need to ask whether there is evidence of the following.

An awareness of interactive processes

Descriptive work tends to focus on people in a reported scenario, but failure to acknowledge what happens, or fails to happen, in 'the space between people' is a significant omission. We need to be seeing evidence of a heightened sensitivity to processes, as this is where much of our work in the helping professions operates. For example, a descriptive account might record that, during a heated exchange of views, someone got up and left the room. It tells us facts but does not reflect an understanding of the processes that might have been occurring, such as the playing out of a power relationship or the avoidance of conflict.

Creativity

There needs to be evidence that each presenting problem is responded to in a way that addresses the uniqueness of that problem, rather than by an uncritical 'going through the motions'. Where there was no existing appropriate response, has one been created?

Learning and development

Given that reflective practice is about the integration of theory and practice, there needs to be evidence not only that learning has taken place, but of how it has been integrated into practice – in effect, the consequence of the learning has to be evident.

An up-to-date knowledge base

Sometimes candidates present evidence of the knowledge base that has informed their practice, but it is clear that it has not been critically reviewed for some time. Theoretical paradigms that have been influential for many years will have been challenged by other theorists who have a different perspective. Where competing perspectives are not explored, and outdated or even discredited theories are used as supporting evidence, it does little to convince an assessor that a practitioner has his or her 'finger on the pulse' of developments in their particular field and is working 'safely' within their particular codes of practice.

Voice of experience 5.2

I've been assessing portfolios for a few years now, but I still find it difficult when I have to return one because it doesn't convince me that that this person practises reflectively. To counterbalance that, I have to remember that I owe it to the vulnerable members of our society to help ensure that a sound knowledge and value base informs the practice of those who work with them.

Tony, a team manager and practice teacher

An explicit value base

As we noted in Chapter 3, values have such an influence on actions and attitudes that it would be worrying if the values that underpin practice were not given a high profile in something submitted as evidence of reflective practice. We are all influenced by values, even though we may not be aware of it, as, by their very definition, values are what we hold dear. We live our lives according to what we value, and this applies to our professional lives too – what we think of as important will have an influence on what we do. In a reflective account, these influences and the learning that results from the process of 'surfacing', have to be explicit if we are to convince anyone that we are practising in a 'mindful' way. As Thompson comments:

a worker may not be explicitly aware that he or she subscribes to a particular value (the importance of human dignity, for example) but none the less act fully in accordance with this (implicitly held) value. However, it can be argued that the more conscious we are of our own values, the more we are able to ensure that our actions are consistent with them.

(2005, p. 109)

Selectivity

A good reflective account does not necessarily have to be a long one. It is often the case that the better ones are also the shorter ones, because they are not 'padded out' with irrelevant material that is superfluous and adds nothing in

the way of evidence of reflective practice. Indeed, the inclusion of superfluous material can even be a negative indicator – that is, it can be considered as evidence that the person presenting the material does not really understand what it is that he or she is trying to achieve. For example, we have seen directions to a training event and the fire regulations at a course venue being included in a portfolio of evidence! The only positive indicator we could see on that occasion was that this person could put paper into a binder competently, while it seriously undermined our assessment of that person as a reflective practitioner who understood aims, objectives and strategies.

An awareness of comparative practice

Doel and Shardlow (2005) make the point that a lot can be learned about practice and one's role by considering how it is, or has been, conceptualized in different places and in different eras. For example, one might consider whether the present understanding of a nursing, social work or teaching role bears any similarity to how those roles were conceptualized in, say, the 1950s, or how the roles have developed in other parts of the world. Of course, the absence of such a perspective is only a problem if it had been specified particularly as a required area of competence but, if such an inquisitive element were to be included, it would add useful support to a claim to reflective practice.

Motivation

A reflective practitioner will be committed to making his or her practice as informed as possible. One would therefore expect a good reflective account to show evidence not only of an awareness of the importance of directives and updates circulated to them by their employers, but also of being proactive in keeping up to date with developments in his or her particular area of expertise. Reference to independently sought literature, research reports, media comments, journal articles and so on would suggest that this person is an independent thinker and well motivated to learn although, of course, the reference alone and without any analysis would not be convincing.

Recognizing competing perspectives

This ties in closely with the point about complexity discussed earlier. There will always be a variety of perspectives on any situation, and it would be arro-

gant for anyone to propose that their take was the 'right' one. A piece of writing that does not reflect differing perspectives or promotes a particular theoretical approach without recognition of any challenges to it is unlikely to count as evidence of reflective writing, because it underplays the complexity of work in the helping professions and indicates an uncritical approach. With reference to presenting reasoned arguments, Cottrell highlights the importance of 'signposting' critical awareness:

A strong argument will usually critically evaluate alternative perspectives or points of view. By doing so, authors show readers that they have considered other possibilities and not simply presented the first argument that entered their heads. This approach usually strengthens an argument as it suggests that the author has researched the subject or has considered all angles.

(2005, p. 175)

She suggests the word 'alternatively' or the phrase 'it might be argued that' as signalling a recognition of competing perspectives, and to these we would add 'on the other hand' and 'however' as indicators that the writing is taking a critical turn. In the helping professions very little is straightforward and dilemmas are common. We would therefore expect any critically reflective account of practice to reflect a diversity of perspectives and approaches.

And finally, we need to make specific mention of assessment criteria. These provide the standards against which competence is judged and ought therefore to be helpful frameworks for both candidates and assessors/examiners. However, in our experience, it is often the case that many candidates, particularly when submitting portfolios, present what they want to present rather than what they are *asked* to present, and that any match between evidence and criteria seems to be coincidental. Some would argue that the best portfolios are the ones that make the links between criteria and evidence explicit, so that the assessor does not have to make those links for him- or herself. We would suggest, however, that anything else is indicative of a lack of planning or understanding of the task in hand – 'winging it' by presenting a poorly constructed portfolio of evidence hardly gives a positive message of reflective practice to an assessor!

It can help in this respect for someone compiling a portfolio to take a step back and imagine that they are the assessor or examiner reading it, rather than the candidate writing or compiling it. This process acts as a cross-check against criteria because it begs the question: 'If an assessor needs to find this or that evidence, will they be able to find it amongst the detail and, indeed, is it there at all?' Those who have had experience of learning on programmes that use self- or peer assessment may feel more comfortable with this way of working, precisely because it forces them to look at the assessor/examiner perspective.

Practice focus 5.3

Sal and Ali had both been participants on a reflective practice workshop. They had attended because they both carried a responsibility, as part of their jobs, for promoting and assessing reflective practice in others. By talking to each other about their experiences, they realized that both of them found it difficult to explain to candidates what was meant by making their evidence of reflective practice explicit rather than implicit. They raised this issue with the rest of the group and found one particular response very helpful in this respect. Evan explained that he reminded those he supervised that any portfolio of evidence they presented would probably be read by someone who, unlike him, knew nothing about them and had not been party to any discussions about the work that he or she had been doing. Therefore, they would need things spelling out for them, because nothing could be taken as read or inferred from prior knowledge of people or situations. Both Sal and Ali realized that this was a very useful starting point for helping students to understand why they had to make the evidence explicit and food for thought on how they could do so.

Finally, in terms of assessing reflective writing, we offer a checklist developed by one of the present authors in his role as an external examiner to an educational programme for which evidence of reflective practice was a requirement. It incorporates much of what we have discussed in this chapter, and so we include it here, as both assessors and candidates may find it useful.

Checklist for assessors/examiners

- Does the candidate make clear the basis of the work undertaken – the rationale, policy context and so on?
- Does the candidate show evidence of drawing on a professional knowledge base – not just tokenistically mentioning a theoretical approach, for example, but showing an understanding of why it is appropriate in this instance?

- Does the candidate present *explicit* evidence of the required aspects or levels of competence? Is there evidence to indicate that the candidate has understood that the responsibility for demonstrating evidence lies with him or her?
- Does the candidate show evidence of a value base to their practice? Merely mentioning values-related words is not enough – there needs to be evidence of an understanding of why something is significant, what it would mean if a particular value were not respected, and so on.
- Does the candidate adopt an analytical approach? Is the approach to practice clear, focused and critical?
- Is there evidence of a commitment to continuing development? A reflective practitioner recognizes that the helping professions are a complex and evolving field.

With its focus on assessment of competence, the discussion in this section serves to reinforce the responsibility that rests on the shoulders of those doing the assessing to make sure that the standards expected of a reflective practitioner within a particular profession are maintained. While taking this 'gate-keeping' responsibility seriously, we must not forget that as reflective practice is about growing and developing, there is also a responsibility to promote learning through the assessment process. Doel, Sawdon and Morrison remind us that our approach to assessment has the potential to discourage, as well as encourage learning:

There is an inherent power differential between assessor and assessed. Learners submit their work to assessment systems which have the power to make judgements, and these judgements can find the learner wanting. Similar imbalances are to be found in practitioners' own work, where they are expected to develop empowering partnerships with service users, clients and patients. How can the assessment arrangements and methods ensure that learners experience the assessment as one which leaves them feeling more rather than less powerful, while respecting the need for external scrutiny of professional practice and, ultimately, the sanction of failure to license for practice? It is important that the programme's teaching on values such as empowerment is reflected in the way those values are assessed. In this way, individuals will be encouraged to learn from the process rather than to approach it defensively.

(2002, p. 48)