

Chapter 4

Using Strategies and Techniques

INTRODUCTION

Developing reflective practice is not something that can be done by adopting set formulas or following instructions – it is a much more creative, variable and complex undertaking than that. There are, however, strategies and techniques that can be drawn upon to help us develop critically reflective practice, both our own and that of others (if we are supervisors, mentors or practice teachers, for example).

The 'toolbox' of potential techniques we can draw upon is quite immense. For that reason, we have selected a range that relates to each of the three aspects of reflective practice described in Chapter 1, namely:

- Reflection-for-action
- Reflection-in-action
- Reflection-on-action

For each of these three aspects we shall highlight approaches that are: (i) question based; (ii) empowerment based; and (iii) geared towards problem solving. Please note that, while we have chosen to associate particular techniques with either reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action, some of the tools presented can apply to more than one of these categories, and so we would urge you to use them flexibly and creatively to suit the circumstances you are dealing with.

Before reading about these various tools or techniques, you may find it helpful to reread the explanation of the three forms of reflection in Chapter 1.

Our intention in choosing these is merely to try to give you a flavour of what is already out there, of what other people in similar circumstances to you have found helpful and to underline the point that reflective practice is not just about what we do, but also how and why we do it. You may find these particular strategies and techniques more or less useful, depending on the circumstances in which you are working and on your preferred styles of working. If these particular tools are not especially helpful to you, then what is important is that they inspire you to go on to find techniques that you do find helpful.

What works for one person will not necessarily work for another. For example, some people find reflective techniques that rely on a predefined set of questions restrictive, while others find the focus they bring helps them to get a good overview of the situation. Furthermore, some approaches are particularly useful for those times when we are reflecting on our own (personal reflective space), while others can be more helpful when we are bouncing ideas off someone else (dyadic reflective space) or in a group reflective space context.

Whether you are concerned with developing your own practice or with promoting and/or assessing critically reflective practice in others, the techniques and approaches that follow have the potential to prove useful for both. We hope that they inspire you to adopt, adapt or design others for your own purposes.

Please note that some of these tools are based on work previously undertaken by one of the present authors – see Thompson (2006b).

TOOLS FOR PROMOTING REFLECTION

I Reflection-for-action: question-based techniques

1.1 Systematic practice

This is an approach to practice that requires us to focus on three questions when we first start planning any form of intervention. Their purpose is to help prevent 'drift' – that feeling of not really being able to keep a handle on what we are doing and why we are doing it, and of not being able to justify our courses of action if required to do so. Thompson's (2002) model of systematic practice is based around three key questions. These are:

- **What are you trying to achieve?** This question asks us to identify aims and objectives, and is therefore concerned with goal setting.
- **How are you going to achieve it?** This second question is about the processes involved in getting us from where we are now to where we want to be. So, if the first question is about goal setting, then the second is about strategy setting.
- **How will you know when you have achieved it?** One of the strengths of this framework is that the third question acts as a check on our proposals for action, helping to ensure that our goals are achievable and our strategies appropriate.

The first two questions are commonly used as part of planning and assessment. However, the third question is often omitted, even though it can be crucial in ensuring that we have answered the first two questions appropriately and have not been too vague in doing so. For example, if the answer given to the first question was: 'To improve the relationship between Mr Barnes and his daughter', and to the second: 'By arranging for them to go out for a meal together once a week after school', then the third question highlights a potential problem. How would we know that the relationship had improved? Improved to what extent? Would we be able to judge when it was appropriate to withdraw from the situation? Would we know what success looked like in this case?

Systematic practice is about having a plan, albeit one that can be revisited and revised, rather than fumbling about in the dark, hoping that things will work out if we try long and hard enough. But that plan needs to be workable or else it will not provide the structure needed to prevent 'drift'.

The apparent simplicity of this framework of questions belies its usefulness. The questions are short and easy to remember, but many students, practitioners and managers have found them invaluable in terms of being able to feel in control of their workload and earning the professional credibility that comes along with being focused.

Voice of experience 1.2

I've been on a couple of training courses where I've heard about techniques that sound really useful and I fully intend to try them out, but then I tend to fall back into my usual work patterns once I get back to the office. This time,

though, someone introduced me to a framework that had the potential to address my biggest failing – keeping a focus on aims and objectives without getting sidetracked and losing the plot. When I got back to the office I printed out the key questions that this approach suggests we focus on and pinned the page to the wall opposite my desk. Using this framework has helped me to develop new work patterns, as it has become my starting point for analysing what I'm planning to do. In fact it's worked so well that I've been tempted to take the notice down, but, I think I'll leave it there as a talking point.

Josie, a care manager

1.2 Objectives tree

Many people find a visual representation of plans and ideas easier to work with than verbal discussion or lines of prose. If you are one of those people, then engaging in reflection-for-action by using a tree diagram to focus your thoughts is something that you might find helpful. While the questions are not dissimilar to those discussed earlier, the difference here is that boxes and inter-linking lines are used to help make thought processes more explicit. As with systematic practice, the first step is to ask the question:

What are you trying to achieve? The aim identified provides the content for the first box at the top of the page (see Figure 4.1). The next step in this technique is to ask:
What it is that will contribute to the achievement of that aim? There are likely to be a number of contributing factors and each one needs to be given its own box in a second tier, all linked by lines to that initial tier. Once these have been identified, a third question needs to be posed:
What action needs to be taken to bring about what has been highlighted in each of the second tier of boxes? As you have probably guessed, these action plans form the content of a third tier of steps to be taken. This process can take a fair bit of time if you are new to it, but it can pay dividends to persevere until you become more familiar with it as a way of working. The fact that there is a visual representation in front of you can help keep your mind focused on what you are trying to achieve, particularly as the box containing the original aim will always be at the forefront, especially if the size of paper used allows for the objectives tree to fit onto one page.

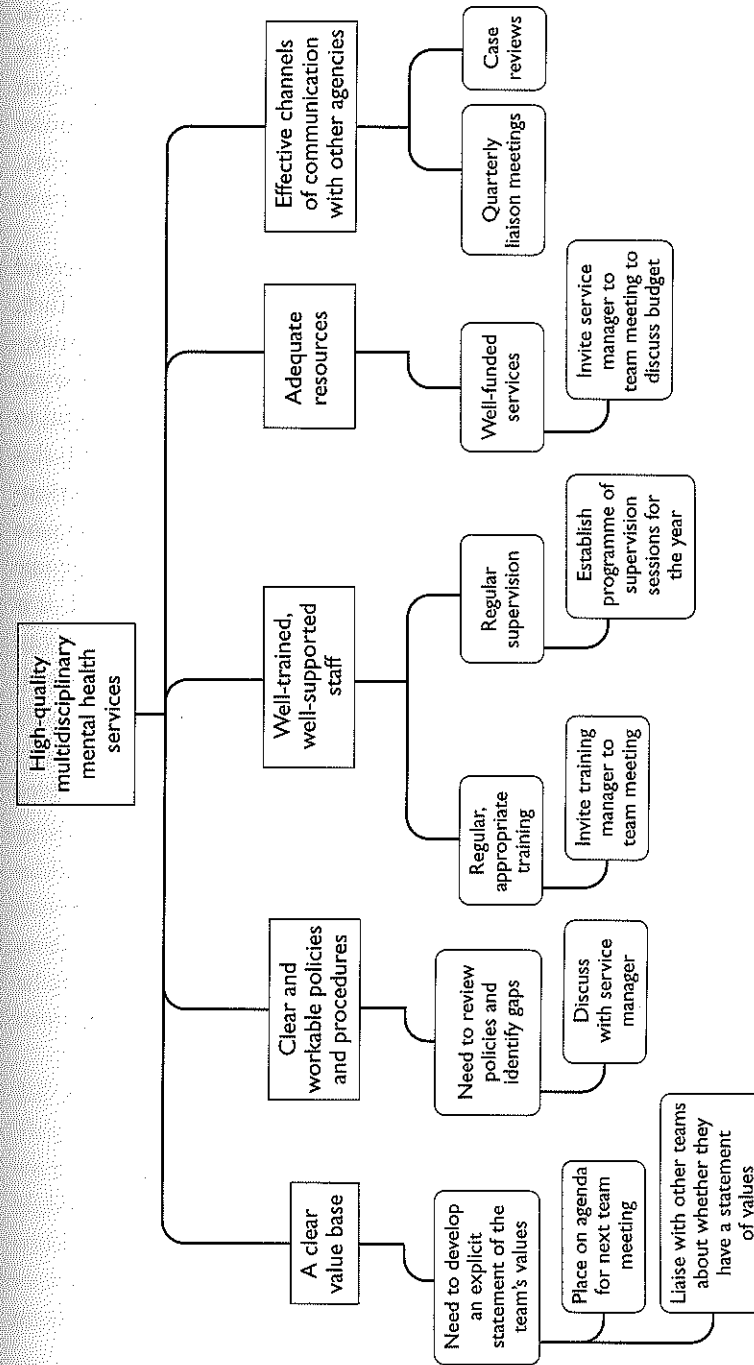


Figure 4.1 Example of an objective line

You can keep the tree diagram simple or, as confidence in the technique grows, you might find yourself adding new tiers, or subsections of tiers. The trick is to ensure that the links to the relevant boxes are clearly identified, so that the outcome is a 'map' which shows the roads you need to follow in order to reach your destination (that original aim identified in the box at tier one).

1.3 *Embedded whys*

This approach relies on using the question 'Why?' to help us to understand the underlying reasons for problems and provide information which, in turn, will inform our actions. As such, it does not provide a framework of pre-defined questions but, instead, prompts us to formulate questions of our own. When we are giving thought to how to address a problem, it can be useful to have some understanding of why that problem has occurred. Armed with this information, we are better equipped to move forward and keep any intervention focused and relevant. For example, if we are working with someone who is debilitated by anxiety, then any attempts to build up confidence can become counterproductive if the reasons for the anxiety are not well understood. It is unusual for one 'why?' question to get to the root of any problem, but it can lead us into another and another 'why?' question (each embedded in the previous one like a set of Russian dolls – see Thompson, 2006b) until we really start to uncover what lies at the heart of an issue and understand exactly where our problem-solving focus needs to be. An example of 'embedded whys' giving us a better understanding would be:

Why am I feeling anxious about working with Mr Walters?

– I am worried about the potential for violence.

Why am I worried about the potential for violence?

– Last time I went there he was aggressive towards me.

Why was he aggressive towards me?

– He seemed to think I was intending to report him to the police because I was aware he was using illegal drugs.

Why would he assume that?

– He seems to see me as an authority figure. Perhaps he doesn't understand my role.

Why wouldn't he understand my role?

– Perhaps I didn't explain it clearly enough to him. If I want him to avoid being aggressive towards me again, I will need to make sure he has a good understanding of my role.

If you are using this technique with others to promote their reflective practice, it needs to be utilized sensitively, as it can feel threatening to be asked 'why?', especially several times over. We would urge you to read more about it if you think you might want to adopt it as a strategy (see Thompson, 2006b). Our purpose here is just to introduce it as an example of how question-based frameworks do not have to be pre-structured in order to be useful.

2 Reflection-for-action: emancipatory techniques

2.1 *Visioning*

As the name implies this technique is about imagining a future situation. It is included here as an emancipatory technique, because it implies working towards a positive future. For many people in poor health, distress or disadvantage it is often difficult to envisage a positive future, but there are techniques which can help at this stage of reflection-for-action. For example, we can invite people to make their hopes and fears explicit by asking them to imagine what they could wish for if you told them you had acquired a magic wand. Such a technique can help people to bring emotional issues to the surface where they can more easily be addressed. Having a sense of where someone wants to get to in their life can provide the basis for future work with them to that end.

Having a vision of a hoped-for outcome can also foster commitment to proposed forms of action, especially where the necessary steps are likely to prove difficult, as might be the case when someone wants to overcome an addiction, for example. Visioning can also work for us in our roles as members of the helping professions. When we feel demoralized or disempowered, visioning ourselves as confident and competent can help us to discover what we need to do in order to get to that stage and, as such, feed into our continuous professional development.

2.2 *If I were . . .*

This is a technique which can help us to reflect on our role, and what it is that we can bring to a situation. As such, it can provide a confidence boost by highlighting to ourselves and others the uniqueness of our particular role within multidisciplinary endeavours to bring about change. When reflecting on a way forward, it can be useful to try to put ourselves in the shoes of other people involved in a given situation and to consider what we could contribute

if we were in their position. So, for example we might surmise that, 'If I were a physiotherapist, I would be able to work with Mrs Leeson towards improving her breathing technique and mobility.' Or, 'If I were a housing officer, I could help to get her rehoused in accommodation that would better suit her need.' Identifying the uniqueness of colleagues' roles and responsibilities can be a useful prompt for reflecting on one's own role and responsibilities – to think about what *we* in our own particular capacity can do to make a positive difference. As well as being a confidence boost, reflecting in this way can help to refine our planning, so that we do not waste time duplicating the work that could be done adequately, or perhaps more competently, by a colleague from another discipline, but concentrate instead on our particular strengths.

Students, and those assessing their progress, may find this a helpful technique for assessing how well they understand the boundaries of their role.

2.3 *Chunk up, chunk down*

While the previous technique focuses on the power of individuals to contribute to positive change, this one reminds us to consider the wider context within which individuals operate, and can prompt us to consider at what level our intervention might be most effective.

It has its roots in the field of neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and refers to the process of moving between two levels of analysis – broad thinking and narrow. The term 'chunking down' refers to moving away from broader issues to concentrate on finer detail, while 'chunking up' refers to the opposite – moving from fine detail to consider the bigger picture. Those with some knowledge of sociology may recognize these distinctions in the different approaches of sociologists such as Goffman (1971) and other symbolic interactionists who focused on the micro-level interactions between individuals, and Marx (When, 2000) and other structuralist thinkers who focused in the macro level of wider social structures and processes. This is not to say that this technique requires an in-depth understanding of sociology or, indeed, psychology, but it does highlight the need to consider whether 'chunking up' or 'chunking down' might throw light on a situation, or suggest a useful way forward. What needs to be borne in mind, however, is that it is not a matter of *either* a broad *or* a narrow focus – both broad and narrow thinking have their part to play and problems occur when one is used to the exclusion of the other or in the wrong circumstances.

3 Reflection-for-action: problem-solving techniques

3.1 *The RED approach*

This is a tool that was specifically designed to help staff and managers in the 'people professions' to address conflict situations. As such, it can be a valuable aid to reflection-for-action where a calm and focused approach is needed in order to address tension. It is referred to as the RED approach because it has three elements:

- **R** – refers to the need to *recognize* conflict. It is not uncommon for busy practitioners to fail to recognize a situation as one involving conflict and they may mistakenly interpret it in individualistic terms. For example, being in conflict with someone named Sam may be interpreted as 'Sam is being awkward' rather than more realistically perhaps as 'Sam and I are in conflict with one another.'
- **E** – indicates the need to *evaluate* conflict. This means weighing up how significant the conflict is and what is likely to be the best response to it in the circumstances. Some conflicts may be so minor that they may be safely left alone, while others certainly cannot be.
- **D** – stands for *dealing* with conflict. Conflict situations can be very demanding and so thinking carefully about how to handle them is an important part of the process. Entering a conflict situation non-reflectively can make the enterprise more dangerous than it needs to be.

As an approach, it calls on the person dealing with conflict to draw on what he or she knows about feelings, and particularly about heightened emotions, to inform what they do in conflict situations and how they do it. Without this prior reflection, it is all too easy to exacerbate a tense situation and put ourselves and others in unnecessary danger. If our intention is to solve a problem, then adding to it is not going to be a satisfactory outcome! Using the RED approach will not make anyone an expert in dealing with conflict, nor do you have to be a conflict expert in order to use it. Its usefulness is as a reflective tool for thinking things through before 'getting stuck in' and making a difficult situation worse because we have not recognized that it *is* a conflict situation, or taken on board the knowledge base that already exists about handling such situations.

Practice focus 4.1

Jules's first day as practice manager had not been easy. There had been numerous demands on his time from lots of different quarters. By late afternoon he had still not had time for a break and was feeling quite disorientated. When one of the patients insisted on speaking to him about the long waiting times at the health centre, Jules suggested that he 'join the queue'. At this the patient became extremely angry and took several very tense minutes to placate. Jules's initial reaction was to blame the patient for being oversensitive – after all, he had only meant it as a joke. But, after a very welcome cup of coffee and an opportunity to gather his thoughts, he realized that he had been insensitive. When he had made his flippant remark, he had not taken into account that patients at a surgery are likely to be experiencing heightened emotions for one reason or another and that being kept waiting would only have added another to this. This was something he knew about and, with his knowledge of conflict and conflict management, he was surprised that he hadn't seen it coming. As well as knowing about conflict, he had experience of managing it too – in fact, that had helped him to get the job in the first place – but he was disappointed that he hadn't recognized this situation as one and dealt with it more appropriately.

3.2 Cost-benefit analysis

While this is something that can be used at any stage of reflection, this is a very useful planning tool in a number of ways, including:

- establishing a working relationship based on partnership
- promoting trust
- establishing priorities
- highlighting positives.

As an aid to decision making it provides the visual record that many people find useful. The simple process involves drawing a line down the middle of a sheet of paper and heading one side 'Costs' and the other 'Benefits'. It can be used by an individual, but is especially useful for helping someone else in assisting them to 'see the wood for the trees', when their thinking has become muddled. Very often, people who are distressed or anxious find it difficult to make decisions, and so this tool can be helpful by making the consequences of particular courses of action explicit. Few decisions are straightforward, and there is usually some sort of trade off involved. Cost-benefit analysis can help people to project their thinking forward, so that they can envisage the benefits that might result in the future from taking a difficult decision in the present. It also has the

great strength of providing a form of informal contract to which we can return if the person we are working with does not feel happy with a decision or course of action, which means that we are less likely to be targeted for blame.

It is also very useful for encouraging reflection about the consequences of decision making from a variety of perspectives – in effect, it can encourage people to put themselves in other people's shoes, which is often helpful where conflict is involved. So, when thinking about the 'costs' element, the question 'the cost to whom?' can be used very effectively to broaden out a person's thinking and remind them of their obligations to others in a given situation.

3.3 Rehearsing

Again, this approach is about projecting into the future and using what is already known about human psychology and social and organizational behaviour to help identify and prepare for problems that we are likely to encounter when embarking on a chosen course, rather than thinking after the event that we might have handled it better. However, it goes beyond predicting likely outcomes and involves actually rehearsing how we might respond to them in a positive way. That is not to say that we need to rehearse whole speeches, although some people do find it useful to have some sort of 'script' in their head, or a list of bullet points on a notepad, in advance of a situation. Anticipating a response or set of behaviours allows for thinking time – drawing on what is known about, for example, likely behaviour in conflict situations or when someone is going to be given bad or unwelcome news. Rehearsing allows us to act out scenarios in our heads, and to revise or reject approaches that do not seem as effective or appropriate as we had first thought.

As well as being a helpful exercise for individual workers when interacting with colleagues, managers and so on, this type of reflection-for-action can be used to good effect with people we are seeking to help who feel unconfident about participating in meetings, addressing conflict situations, or any set of circumstances for which they feel unprepared or powerless. Practice teachers and mentors might also find this works well with students and other learners.

4 Reflection-in-action: question-based approaches**4.1 Risk assessment models**

While risk assessment is an important aspect of planning ahead, it is often the case in potentially hazardous situations that we are required to think on our

feet – to make decisions while in the midst of the action. The strength of risk models is that they provide a framework for ordering our thoughts when the pressure is on to think and act quickly, especially when vulnerable, confused and sometimes frightened people are looking to us for guidance. It can be reassuring to know that other workers have been in that situation before us, and it makes sense to at least consider the advice of others who have experienced or researched the very difficulties we are facing. For example, Brearley (1982) poses questions which prompt us to think about, amongst other things, what turns a *potentially* risky situation into an *actual* one. Doel and Shardlow (2005) reproduce a risk assessment tool which highlights a number of areas of risk, including financial, social, environmental, psychological, familial and physical risks, which also requires us to explore and evaluate each new situation rather than following well-trodden and routine paths.

There are many risk assessment tools available, and we need to be selective in our usage of them because they do not all do the same job. What should guide us in choosing a risk-assessment framework as a tool for reflection-in-action is whether the questions it poses help us to decide:

- whether to act
- when to act
- whether we have enough information on which to base an informed decision.

4.2 The 3 Hs: Head – Heart – Habit

When in the midst of a difficult situation, it can be all too easy to concentrate on one aspect at the expense of others. Keeping these three words (head, heart and habit) at the forefront of our consciousness can remind us to think about how and why humans behave in the ways that we do – especially what it is that motivates behaviour. Armed with this knowledge, and having taken time out to reflect on it, we become better equipped to facilitate positive change.

These three key words prompt us to ask the questions that can help inform our actions, so that they are not based on routine or guesswork:

- **Head.** What part is reasoning playing here? The brain will be processing ideas and trying to make sense of them in a situation where a decision is required.

- **Heart.** What emotions are involved here (for example fear, excitement, hope) and how are they impacting on behaviour?
- **Habit.** Is this about long-established patterns of behaviour which are continuing because they have never been called into question?

A great deal of time can be spent on producing a plan of action to address a particular issue but, if one or more of the ‘Three Hs’ is ignored, then the success of that plan may become compromised. For example, in a shared action plan, both helper and person being helped can accept something as ‘the right thing to do’ at a rational level, but that plan may not come to fruition if something at an emotional level affects motivation – if their heart is not in it, as it were. Furthermore, even where commitment and motivation are present, habits are often hard to break, and plans may well go adrift if the potential for habit to affect behaviour is ignored or underestimated.

4.3 Think–feel–do

This is a similar technique, in that it reminds us about human psychology and the need to consider the different dimensions of human experience: thoughts, feelings and actions. This framework can help us to avoid going into ‘automatic pilot mode’ where, in the midst of pressure to get things done, the impact of feelings, and the benefits of reflection, tend to get minimized or forgotten altogether. It is not so much a case of providing direct questions in themselves, but rather keywords for basing questions on – questions such as: ‘Have I thought this through?’, ‘Are the risk factors too high?’, ‘Will she be too frightened to move out of this relationship?’, ‘Is this the right time?’, and so on. As such, using *Think-Feel-Do* as a kind of mantra can act as a ‘reality check’ when work pressures are high and remind us that we are people working with people and not robots working with inanimate objects. Even though we might feel more comfortable with one or two of the three aspects, effective practice requires that we address all three.

This framework can be useful for clarifying our own thinking and how our feelings are influencing the situation, but it is also a very valuable tool to be used by people with a responsibility for promoting reflective practice in others (supervisors, mentors or practice teachers, for example).

5 Reflection-in-action: emancipatory approaches

5.1 Reframing

This approach can be very effective for getting people to think of themselves and their situation in a different light. Sometimes progress towards a goal is hampered by a sense of hopelessness or negativity, especially where self-esteem is low. There is something to be said for perseverance, but it can become counterproductive to continue with a course of action when someone is experiencing these feelings, as it tends to set up a vicious circle. For example, failure becomes more likely where there is a tendency for low self-esteem to affect energy and commitment – this feeds back into the low self-esteem and reinforces it. People can then perceive this outcome as a self-fulfilling prophecy and use it to reaffirm their negative self-perception through comments such as: ‘I told you I’d never be able to do this’, and so on.

Reframing is a technique that can help to turn these feelings around, so that people feel more positive and therefore more likely to succeed in their aims. Imagine, for example, that you have been working with a young woman with a learning disability, hoping that she will gain enough confidence to enrol for a course in fashion design at her local college. If she perceives herself as ‘stupid’ and the students and tutors as ‘clever’, then it is unlikely that she will ever feel confident enough to make that step, however much you try to bolster her self-esteem. The strength of the reframing technique is that it requires us to stop and rethink – to take a step back to consider different perspectives and to offer up a different interpretation of events and perceptions, one that puts things in a different and more positive light. So, for example, if the situation with this young woman were to be reframed so that she is persuaded to see herself not as stupid, but as an enthusiastic woman with a vivid imagination and lots of ideas, then a successful outcome is more likely to be achieved.

As a technique, it need not take much time to put into practice, but it has the potential to turn things around dramatically because of the effect it can have on confidence and motivation. It is an example of where thinking ‘on our feet’, but without falling foul of BOB (the Bypassing Our Brain problem), can make the difference between a negative and a positive self-image.

5.2 Noticing

This is a term used by Boud and Walker (1990) to refer to the need to pay attention to key aspects of the situation. It is based on a recognition of the

importance of observational skills – the ability to draw out from our experience those aspects of the situation that are particularly significant. As such, ‘noticing’ is an important activity when it comes to reflective practice.

However, with specific reference to *critically* reflective practice, as we noted in Chapter 1, Mezirow (1983) introduced a useful approach known as ‘perspective transformation’. This involves recognizing constraints that socialization into a particular culture tends to put on our thinking, as well as how we see and value things. Perspective transformation has much in common with reframing, but relates more specifically to the development of *emancipatory* understandings – that is, approaches that challenge the potentially oppressive stereotyping of certain groups (people with mental health problems, for example).

Maximizing our ability for ‘noticing’ can be a very useful strategy for promoting reflection, both our own and that of others for whom we have a responsibility for encouraging and supporting learning. Where we are able to incorporate perspective transformation, with its emphasis on the empowering potential of freeing people up from constraints, then this is even better.

5.3 Avoiding, or breaking out of, the drama triangle

The helping professions tend to attract people who want to make a difference to other people’s lives, but this enthusiasm for offering support and trying to ‘make things better’ can become problematic if care is not taken to maintain appropriate boundaries when involved in situations of conflict. In such circumstances, people who see themselves as ‘victims’ of the wrongdoing or insensitivity of others will often be looking for someone to ‘rescue’ them, and we need to keep our wits about us if we are not to be drawn into conflicts and ascribed a role we did not sign up for, or see as appropriate.

The term ‘drama triangle’ comes from the field of transactional analysis (see the *Guide to Further Learning* at the end of the book) and helps us to understand the ‘space between people’ – the processes that take place within group dynamics (Hopkins, 1986). Transactional analysis is too complex an approach to try to explain it adequately in the space we have here, but we have picked out the ‘drama triangle’ concept as an example of something which can inform our understanding of situations as they unfold.

The drama triangle involves three ‘players’.

- **The victim.** This person has a real or imagined understanding that someone is doing them harm, is bringing a threat to their happiness, or is in some way persecuting them.
- **The persecutor.** This person is perceived by the 'victim' as the guilty party, as the person responsible for causing the problems.
- **The rescuer.** This is the person who is seen by the 'victim' as an avenue for addressing the problems caused by the 'persecutor'.

The problem with this triangle is that it involves the development of an unhealthy dynamic. Members of the helping professions can be a prime target for being seen as a 'rescuer' – seduced into taking sides and losing neutrality, perhaps only to find out later that the victim's perception of being persecuted was not an accurate one (it is sometimes the case that it turns out to be the 'victim' who has been doing the persecuting). The drama triangle can lead us to adopt one person's partial interpretation instead of developing our own more holistic, thorough and impartial assessment. Being aware of the dangers of the drama triangle can help us to avoid falling into the trap of being drawn into taking sides.

This provides an important example of where reflection-in-action can make the difference between mindful and mindless practice and thereby empower us as workers and managers – where drawing on research and practice experience can highlight awareness and help prevent our objectivity being compromised.

6 Reflection-in-action: problem-solving approaches

6.1 Using dissonance

In any form of work in the helping professions, we are likely to encounter some degree of opposition to change. A reluctance to explore and perhaps reconsider long-held views and attitudes can become a barrier to change and can help to maintain power imbalances, particularly where the attitudes are discriminatory. 'Cognitive dissonance' describes a state experienced when there is a contradiction between two sets of ideas. We find ourselves in a situation that causes us discomfort and cannot be easily tolerated unless one set of ideas is revised or abandoned. For example, we might have been working with a very experienced mentor for many years and, because we respect his or

her judgement, we would normally have made this person our first port of call when looking for advice. One day, we overhear a team colleague that we respect complaining about what they perceive as the mentor's poor judgement and unreliability, which makes us feel extremely uncomfortable. This discomfort comes from cognitive dissonance having been created. If we want to hold on to our belief that the mentor is a wise and reliable person, then it means rejecting the view of someone whose views we respect and value. The other alternative is to hold on to our perception of our colleague as someone whose views we value and respect, and thereby no longer seeing the mentor as someone to be trusted. And so, in order to resolve the contradiction, one set of beliefs has to be abandoned.

This approach draws on the insights that psychology can bring to our understanding of how individuals interact with each other, and we can use this understanding to good effect by creating dissonance in order to throw the attitude or belief we are trying to address into sharp relief. Once it is made obvious to a person that they are holding or expressing two contradictory attitudes or beliefs, then a situation is created where the discomfort caused can become a catalyst for moving forward in his or her thinking. While potentially very effective, it is not an easy technique to adopt and requires careful planning and a subtle approach. It is an advanced tool, rather than a beginner's one.

6.2 *Elegant challenging*

This technique can be used in similar circumstances to the ones described above, in that it helps to address entrenched attitudes and behaviours by the use of a subtle approach rather than direct confrontation. If we draw on our understanding of human behaviour in general we can appreciate that direct confrontation, especially in a public place or where there are witnesses, has the potential to cause embarrassment. This can then lead on to that person blaming us for making them appear foolish – something which is likely to have adverse effects on our chances, or indeed anyone else's, of addressing the issue in the future. Indeed, it can be the case that the attitudes become even more entrenched in the face of a perceived 'assault' on their views – as in responses such as: 'I've got a right to my own views', and 'Who do you think you are to tell me I can't think or act as I see fit?' While direct confrontation runs the risk of being ineffective in promoting change (for example, in situa-

tions where someone consistently uses racist language), so too can ignoring the matter. This is where 'elegant challenging' comes into its own, in that it helps us to raise issues in a way that is perceived as constructive and helpful, rather than as a personal attack.

So, for example, let us imagine a meeting where someone repeatedly refers to migrant workers as 'scroungers and troublemakers'. You are not comfortable with this and can see that other colleagues find her attitude discriminatory. Which of the following options do you think might be more effective in challenging her?

1. Stop her in her tracks during the meeting, tell her you think she is misinformed and that you will not listen any longer to her racist ranting.
2. Find an opportunity as soon as possible after the meeting to engage her in conversation about the issue – perhaps alert her to a well-chosen article or informative website where myths and preconceptions about immigrants are aired.

The second option is more typical of the 'elegant' approach, as it encourages the person concerned to be open to persuasion because you are being reasonable and considerate of her feelings and learning needs, which sets the stage for her to be reasonable in return. Again, this is an approach which requires skill and forethought if it is to work, but isn't that what reflective practice is all about?

Practice focus 4.2

Ffion had been working at the family support centre for over a year and, for the most part, really enjoyed her work. There was just one aspect that worried her. On several occasions she had witnessed one of the volunteers expressing homophobic views quite openly. She didn't want the anti-discriminatory values that underpinned the centre's work to be compromised by this attitude, but felt uncomfortable about raising this issue with the volunteer.

During her next supervision session with her manager, Ffion was encouraged to reflect on her understanding of how learning takes place. This reminded her that a confrontational approach often results in the person who is being criticized becoming defensive to the point where their views become even more entrenched. She had recently read about 'elegant challenging' and decided that, instead of a confrontational approach, she would try being more subtle in helping the volunteer to appreciate how unfair she was being. Over the next few weeks Ffion left articles about anti-discriminatory practice in the staff-room and introduced the topic of homophobia as a case

study at one of the regular study sessions that she facilitated at the centre. As she had hoped, there was a lot of discussion within the group, and she noticed that the volunteer in question didn't say much but listened a lot. Ffion had hoped that this more subtle or 'elegant' approach would encourage the volunteer to question her own views and become open to new learning, and it seemed to be working.

6.3 Force-field analysis

This technique has been around for a long time, dating back to Lewin's work in the 1940s. Although not its only application, it can be a very effective way of reflecting-in-action. It involves identifying two sets of factors:

- **Driving forces** – that is, any factor which makes change more likely; and
- **Restraining forces** – those factors that make change less likely to occur.

For example, in a situation where a young boy is refusing to attend school, we might negotiate that he returns to school for two days a week for a specified period. In this instance, the fact that he wants his parents to be proud of him might act as a driving force for change, while peer pressure not to attend school is likely to act as a restraining force in the negotiated change process. Force-field analysis can easily be represented in diagrammatic form, with arrows highlighting whether a particular factor is promoting or inhibiting change. As such, it can help to make the justification for change explicit and facilitate an ethos of partnership in which the commitment for change is more likely to be shared.

In terms of problem solving, force-field analysis will not provide the answer but, as a reflective tool, it will help to 'unpack' the problem by providing a framework for exploring the processes involved. It can be used at an individual or group level and is a good way for practice teachers and mentors to assess a learner's understanding of individual and organizational change processes.

7 Reflection-on-action: question-based frameworks

7.1 What? So what? Now what?

Reflection-on-action involves thinking back over what has happened, and our

part in it. However, it is more than just a matter of recalling, as it involves *analysis* of the recollection. As Atkins explains:

To analyse something, whether an object, a set of ideas or a situation, is to undertake a detailed examination of the structure or constituent parts or elements and ask questions about them, in order to more fully understand their nature and how the parts relate to and influence each other. The term 'critical' introduces a further dimension to analysis, in that judgements are made about the strengths and weaknesses of the different parts as well as of the whole.

(2004, p. 36)

Some find it easier than others to reflect on practice after the event or to add that critical 'edge' to their thinking. Having a framework of questions, or prompts, can therefore be useful aids. The following examples are just three of those that we have come across. One may suit you more than another, or perform better for one purpose than another. If they do not work for you, but inspire you to devise your own, then all to the good. What matters is that we engage in the processes necessary to stop us from 'Bypassing Our Brain' and falling into uncritical and unthinking work practices.

Borton (1970) proposes that practitioners ask themselves the following three questions when engaging in reflection about their work:

- **What?** This requires us to formulate a definition of what has happened or is at issue.
- **So what?** This invites reflection and analysis of that event or issue.
- **Now what?** A stimulus to formulate an action plan, or perhaps outline a learning need.

Those new to the process of reflection may find that they need more in the way of guidance, but a set of questions such as this is easy to remember, and provides at least a starting point. It does require some familiarity with critical

thinking skills, without which the second stage cannot happen, but sub-questions can be added to facilitate our own critical reflection. Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper have built on Borton's three questions in this way in order to help move people on from a descriptive level of reflection to one which incorporates theory and knowledge building and what they refer to as 'action-oriented reflection' (2001, p. 35).

7.2 *Preparing for supervision*

In discussing learning through reflective practice, Bates suggests that prepared case studies be brought to supervision or training sessions, so that an element of analytical thought about why the work was done and what had been learned from it has already taken place. Supervisors and trainers can then build on that analysis, by introducing a critical element, such as is evident in his sample of questions:

- Did our department/section/organisation act appropriately?
- Was the response too heavy-handed?
- Did we do the right thing by the way we acted?
- How should we have acted in this case to provide a better service?

(2004, p. 26)

This particular set of questions may relate to a specific set of circumstances, but it can serve as an example of how a set of critically reflective questions can be fashioned to suit any situation that is under review. It also reiterates our earlier point that we do not have to rely on 'experts' to provide reflective tools – with a little imagination, we can devise them ourselves.

7.3 *'Prompts'*

While question-based frameworks can be an aid to ordering our thoughts when reflecting on action, these do not necessarily need to be complex or even predefined. For some people a word or phrase can provide enough of a prompt to get those thought processes into gear. For many, the appeal of this is that it is easy to carry those prompts around in our head, and for them to be recalled without too much effort when time is at a premium. In his discussion of learning styles and motivation, Honey suggests getting into a habit of highlighting learning points by using the 'L' word as a prompt:

In conversations get into the habit of using the 'L' word. 'Something I learned the other day was ...' 'What I learned from that was ...' Make it a rule that whenever you indulge in anecdotes and 'war stories' you will explicitly include the lessons you learned.

(2003, p. 24)

This might well work for you, but there are other prompts we have come across, such as:

- **Good/Bad.** What went well today/this week? What didn't?
- **Erase/Rewind.** If I could have the time back, would I have done things differently?
- **Why did I do that?** Can I identify what informed my practice in this instance?
- **Spot check.** Do I feel in control of my workload? Could I explain my aims and objectives in my fields of responsibility if called on to do so now?
- **Humble pie.** Have I been challenged today/this week and learned a lesson from it?
- **Making a difference.** What part did I play in promoting change today/this week? Was it positive or negative change? At what level?

What these words and phrases have in common is that it is relatively easy for them to be recalled, and for the reflection-on-action that they prompt to become a habit – part of the structure of our working day or week and, indeed, an integral part of our workload rather than an add-on to it.

8 Reflection-on-action: emancipatory approaches

8.1 The CIA framework

In all aspects of the helping professions, the potential for workers to feel under pressure is high – it goes with the territory, and it is not uncommon for workers to feel as if there is nothing they can do about the pressures they face. The CIA framework is a tool that can help to prevent that pressure overflowing into harmful stress. By introducing a sense of realism about what can

and cannot be addressed by any one individual, it is an extremely useful exercise for helping to put things into perspective and re-establishing a sense of control when a feeling of powerlessness threatens to overwhelm and demoralize. The CIA framework highlights *Control*, *Influence* and *Acceptance* as reminders that, whatever we are involved in, there will be things that we can control, things that we cannot control, but which we can influence, and also things that we can neither control nor influence, and so have to accept. Whether we apply this framework to our personal situations or use it when working with others, it can be useful in a number of ways, including:

- **highlighting** what is within someone's control in order to help to challenge negativity and denial about the potential to move forward or address something they do not want to face;
- **focusing** efforts where they are more likely to be effective, thereby countering the risk of setting someone up to fail if he or she is being expected to address something over which they have no control;
- **encouraging** creative thinking about how a situation can be influenced; and
- **concentrating** resources and energy on facilitating acceptance when there is no alternative.

It can therefore be of great help in helping others to see some sort of way forward when the pressures mean they have lost their way or their confidence. In bringing power issues to the fore it helps us to see the bigger picture and our place within it. And, by providing a challenge to self-disempowerment, the CIA framework can be as useful an aid to reflection about self-care as it is to work with disempowered service users.

Voice of experience 4.2

I've been working so hard to help Rita find somewhere to live. She has a learning disability, but everyone agrees that she would manage OK on her own with just a bit of help. But, wherever we've tried, the answer is always the same: 'Sorry, we can't help.' Rita became so demoralized that she wanted to abandon the idea, but I felt bad about that. Then I found out something that made a difference to how we were approaching things – this wasn't about

Rita's learning disability, but about the acute shortage of single-person accommodation in our area. As individuals, we couldn't control that, so we had to accept that this might have to be a long-term goal instead of the main focus of our work together. Now that we have begun to focus instead on how Rita can make her voice heard as a member of her community we have both felt re-energized. I've been putting all my efforts into something that I can't change, but now the role I can play seems to be much clearer.

Drew, an advocate

8.2 *The drawbridge exercise*

This is another technique that helps to focus thinking on the power relations that operate in the social environment in which members of the helping professions operate. It takes the form of an exercise described in Doel and Shardlow (2005) and adapted from Katz (1978). Its purpose is to bring home the existence of differing perspectives and raise the profile of this in terms of respecting diversity and challenging discrimination. This particular exercise involves reading an account of a situation in which someone trying to escape the consequences of her actions ends up being killed, and then exploring which of the six characters in the story should be held responsible for her death. Doel and Shardlow's commentary on the exercise highlights how the apportioning of blame will be influenced by the conceptual framework, or paradigm, from which it is viewed. So, for example, someone looking at the story from a feminist viewpoint might regard the slain woman as the victim of a patriarchal system which sets double standards about fidelity, while, from within a cultural relativist paradigm, the baron who ordered her to be killed was only acting in accordance with what he understood to be 'right and proper' at that time and in that culture.

This exercise can inspire reflection on the significance of differing perspectives, especially in relation to the role of power relations in shaping practice situations. This can then be used to inform future action without reinforcing potentially damaging power inequalities.

9 Reflection-on-action: problem-solving approaches

9.1 *Mind mapping*

While this technique can be used as a planning tool, it can also be very effective in terms of providing the basis for the review and evaluation of practice.

In constructing a visual representation of key ideas and issues, a mind map helps to highlight the connections between them and the potential for ways forward where there are problems – hence the use of the term 'map'. It is based on the work of Tony Buzan and the observation that we do not tend to think in a linear fashion, but jump from one issue to another, especially when under pressure. Figure 4.2 provides an example of a mind map and further examples can be found in Buzan and Buzan (2003) but, very briefly, constructing a mind map involves:

- Taking a sheet of paper and, using it in 'landscape' layout, writing the focus of the map (a project, problem or whatever) in the centre of the page.
- Drawing thick lines radiating from this central point, each representing a theme relating to it, and each theme being written in capital letters along the thick line.
- Drawing thin lines radiating from the top of each thick line, representing sub-themes – these should be spelled out in lower case letters along the length of each thin line.

What results then represents the 'big picture' in diagrammatic form, with the format being conducive to identifying connections between the various strands emanating from the core concept. As a technique it can take some getting used to but, because of its versatility, we would urge you to at least give it a try. The process of constructing the mind map is, in itself, useful for developing thinking skills in general but, more specifically, the technique has the potential to:

- Get, or recover, a sense of control when overwork or other factors have resulted in our thinking becoming 'fuzzy'.
- Facilitate creative thinking by making it easier to see the relationship between different aspects of a situation, moving from one to another without losing sight of the overall picture.
- Highlight an issue (or issues) as particularly crucial or problematic in a situation. For example, the appearance of a particular issue in several places on the map should highlight it as a significant one – something which may not have come to light without the overview that a mind map provides.

Practice focus 4.3

As Ian's supervisor, Karen was aware that one of the cases he had been working on recently had become an increasingly complex one. She had allocated this case to him because, as a final-year student, she felt he needed experience in managing complexity. She knew from her own experience that, with complex pieces of work, it can be difficult to maintain an overview unless the time is made to reflect on what has been happening. And so, at their next supervision session, she introduced Ian to mind mapping, a tool that she had found invaluable in this respect. Together they mapped out what his aims had been and whether progress had been made in any of those areas.

What resulted was a diagrammatic representation of what had been happening since they last met. Karen used this as a basis for exploring problem-solving tactics with Ian, not only in terms of what he was planning to do, but also for evaluating what he had already done. She was heartened to see that, before long, Ian himself was beginning to draw links between what had previously seemed to him to be unconnected issues and to discuss the consequences of his chosen strategies. Ian commented that the process had helped him to see that dealing with issues in isolation was not a good idea, because people don't live their lives like that. Without her suggesting it, Ian came to the next session with all of his casework mapped out in this way and the level of critical reflection rose significantly – a rewarding development for both of them.

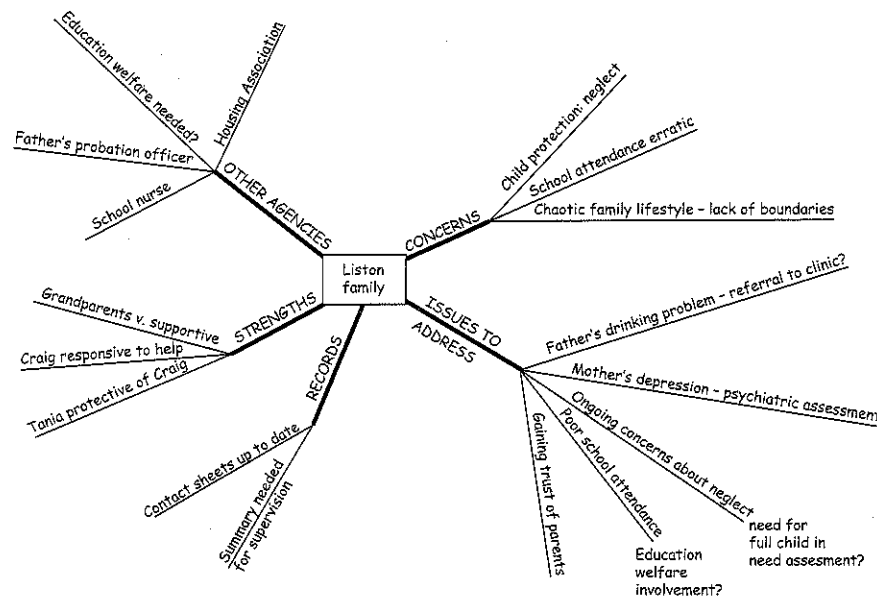


Figure 4.2 Sample of a mind map

9.2 Process recording

This technique requires us to focus on what we referred to earlier as the 'space between people' – that is, the processes that are taking place when people interact, such as negotiation, communication, marginalization, avoidance behaviour, reinforcing and so on. When we are busy, we can get so caught up in getting things done that we can lose sight of the significance of these processes. But, while they tend to operate unseen, they are a crucial part of social interaction. Effective practice involves tuning into the existence and significance of these processes at the time of our involvement (reflection-in-action), but also after the event when reviewing and evaluating the work (reflection-on-action). Writing a process recording is something we can do ourselves to help us to focus on the implications of our actions and evaluate the effectiveness of our problem solving, but is also something that those involved in mentoring and assessing can ask of their students and learners.

Rather than just presenting a case study, it involves specifically identifying the processes that have occurred in a situation chosen for review and analysis. A descriptive account might look something like this:

I met John and his mother at the hospital. He was being interviewed by a police officer while being admitted as a patient because of an injury to his neck. I tried to speak to John, but his mother insisted on speaking on his behalf. He was distressed, but I was unable to speak to a nurse about his condition. I expected the police officer to contact me later but he didn't.

A more process-oriented recording would look more like this:

For the purposes of information gathering and relationship building I met John and his mother at the hospital. It was clear from what the police officer was saying and from his body language that he was treating him as a suspected criminal and was prioritizing his own duties in this respect over John's physical and emotional needs. I was trying to be an advocate, but his mother was preventing me from doing so by constantly speaking on his behalf, although I am not sure whether she thought she was protecting him or denying him help. He was avoiding eye contact with everyone and exhibiting

signs of anxiety, such as picking at the bed cover and fiddling with his watch and jewellery. The staff there seemed to be embarrassed by his mother's emotional outbursts and busied themselves with other matters so that they could avoid any potential conflict. As no-one from the police service got in touch, I felt that they were devaluing my expertise.

Process recording can be an extremely effective tool for 'surfacing' what we often miss and for assessment purposes when we need to know whether a learner has picked up on processes as well as facts.

9.3 Differing perspectives

Doel and Shardlow (2005) describe an activity which they refer to as 'Hold the front page'. It too requires us to make a written record of something we are reflecting on after the event. It is proposed as a tool for learners but, as reflective practitioners are engaged in lifelong learning, it provides an interesting and creative focus for anyone reflecting on action, particularly in terms of diversity. In this activity, we are asked to consider a short case scenario involving a family or group of people. The particular scenario can be followed if you have access to Doel and Shardlow's work but, if not, you can construct your own. The reflection-on-action component of the exercise is to imagine that there is a newspaper devoted to the group or family in our case study. The task is to construct a front page for the newspaper, which will consist of a headline which spells out the main issue (forcing us to think, for example, who in that group has the power to define it) and columns from the various family or group members (who might have competing perspectives on the 'main issue'). Finally, there is the opportunity for 'editorial comment'.

This can be quite an interesting and useful exercise that generates a lot of valuable insights about the significance of difference.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a broad range of tools, techniques or strategies that can be helpful for all three aspects of reflection: reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Not all of the tools will appeal to all readers or fit with all situations, but we hope we have presented enough tech-

niques and strategies that at least some will be of benefit. Also, as we indicated earlier, we hope that being introduced to the tools outlined here will motivate you to think about developing your own tools – finding structured ways of making sense of the specific practice demands of your work setting and role. This is not something that has to be done alone – many people find that working with others in this way can be a very stimulating and rewarding experience.

Critically reflective practice is about moving away from uncritical, routinized or standardized forms of practice towards more informed, imaginative and value-driven approaches. Tools and techniques can be very helpful in making this move if they are used carefully and skilfully. This chapter will not make that move for us, but it should none the less provide an important basis for taking these matters forward.