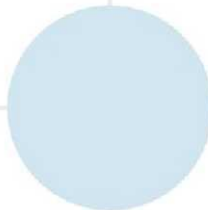
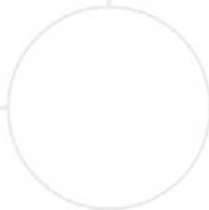
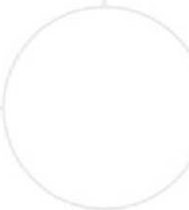
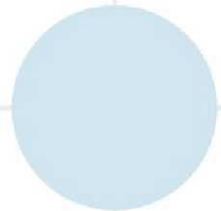
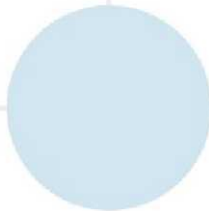
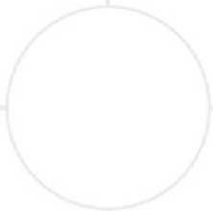
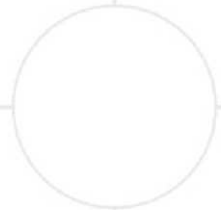
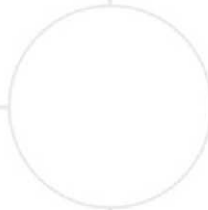
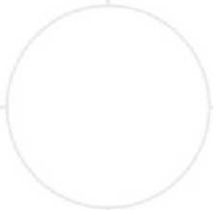
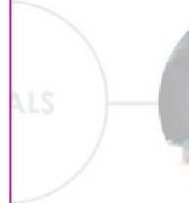




## What is Reflective Practice?

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### Reflection: the foundation of purposeful learning

Reflection is an active process of witnessing one's own experience in order to take a closer look at it, sometimes to direct attention to it briefly, but often to explore it in greater depth. This can be done in the midst of an activity or as an activity in itself. The key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one's own actions and experience—in other words, to examine that experience rather than just living it. By developing the ability to explore and be curious about our own experience and actions, we suddenly open up the possibilities of purposeful learning — learning derived not from books or experts, but from our work and our lives. This is the purpose of reflective practice: to generate learning from experience, whether that is the experience of a meeting, a project, a disaster, a success, a challenging interaction, or any other event, before, during or after it has occurred.

Challenging experiences create particularly powerful opportunities for learning using reflective practice. Different kinds of challenges open up different kinds of learning:

- *Reflecting on struggles* opens a window onto what is working and not working, and can lead to a greater understanding of the true nature of a challenge we are facing.
- Some struggles arise from dilemmas, a clash between our values and an approach we are using in our work. *Reflecting on dilemmas* generates information about what is clashing, and can lead to adjusting our actions to better align with our values.
- *Reflecting on experiences of uncertainty* (for example, when starting a project or dealing with a new kind of problem) illuminates the specific ways in which the approach we are taking is not defined, not concrete, or perhaps not feasible. In that case, reflective practice can point to the need for either problem-solving or acceptance of what is not defined or concrete or not realistic.

Positive experiences are also powerful sources of learning for a reflective practitioner. For example:

- *Reflecting on breakthroughs* (either in our actions or our thinking) helps us uncover practices and processes that lead us to success. A study on scientific

breakthroughs<sup>1</sup> showed they often occur after periods of low activity and discouragement. Examining a breakthrough and what came before it can reveal what we were concretely doing (practices) and how we were doing it (process) so that we can recreate the “flow” of focus and engagement<sup>2</sup> that led to success. By gaining insight into the conditions that allow our creativity to flourish, we become more purposeful about how to work in more creative and satisfying ways.

- *Reflection on successes* can also instruct us on a deeper level of our assumptions and definitions of success. What underlying set of ideas and approaches informs our work when it is most effective? Is this consistent, or at odds, with how success is defined in our work environment? Too often, busy front line practitioners (nurses, social workers, community organizers, etc.) feel scattered and are prone to burnout. By reflecting on successes and uncovering the framework of action and values that leads to success, practitioners and organizations can regain a sense of coherence and focus amid the many things that clamor for their attention.

By becoming more purposeful about our learning through reflection on practice, we become more purposeful in our work and our lives.

### **Practicing Reflection: how often, how much and why**

Reflective practice is simply creating a habit, structure, or routine around examining experience. A practice for reflection can vary in terms of *how often*, *how much*, and *why* reflection gets done. At one end of the spectrum, a work group could go on an extended annual retreat and spend many days documenting and analyzing the learning that has emerged from their past year of work. At the other end, an individual could reflect throughout the day, bringing a high level of awareness to her thoughts and actions in the moment without stopping to analyze her actions and thinking at a broader level.

This comparison points to the diverse ways that reflective practice can be done:

1. Reflection can be practiced at different *frequencies*: every day, every month, every year.
2. Reflection can also vary in *depth*, from a quick pause to notice what happened and didn't happen during a meeting, to a sustained examination and documentation of critical moments during a project.
3. Reflection can serve a variety of *purposes*:
  - It can be *individually* useful, to become more aware of what guides our patterns of action and thinking, and what we struggle with and feel successful about.

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<sup>1</sup> Maini, S. & Nordbeck, B. (1972). Critical moments in research work. A study of research workers in the Behavioural Sciences. *Psychological Research Bulletin*, 12, 10, Lund University, Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, Mihaly & Jeanne (2002). The Concept of Flow. *The Handbook of Positive Psychology*: Oxford University Press, pp. 89-92.

- Reflective practice can be aimed at the purpose of making the work of a *team* more effective and innovative through ongoing capture of learning and making changes to have a greater impact.<sup>3</sup>
- It can be used by *departments, agencies, or organizations* for the purpose of bringing greater alignment between activities, relationships, and deeper values.
- Reflection can be used to strengthen shared thinking, or to expose the framework underlying a complex body of work.

All of these purposes are similar in that they lead to greater understanding of the work people are doing alone or together. Without reflection, innovation and optimal impact are not possible – reflection is essential for improving both the process and outcome of our work.

Designing a practice of reflection means first identifying a purpose or goal, then locating the best opportunities for embedding reflective practice in our work that are realistic and yet occur at the right intervals and with sufficient depth to be meaningful. The bottom line is that it has to be doable. Getting started and maintaining a practice of reflection at a manageable level, however small, transforms the possibility of learning from our work into a reality.

### **Collective vs. individual reflective practice**

If reflective practice “illuminates what the self and others have experienced,”<sup>4</sup> is this an individual or collective activity? It can be either; individuals and groups alike can engage in reflective practice related to their work. Whether you choose to learn from experience at the individual or on a group level depends on your *learning agenda*. Is an organization interested in documenting the learning embedded in its work over the past several months? If so, the experiences its members focus on and the questions they pursue in their reflection process will be about their collective practice. Does an individual need to make sense out of a week’s worth of meetings, frustrations, and turning points in order to decide how to proceed with a project? Then she might explore her experience of the significant moments and key issues that are connected to the decision she needs to make.

Individual and collective reflection need not be sequestered from one another—in fact, they can be mutually supportive within an overall learning process. For example:

- Individual practitioners who wish to strengthen their work can form a reflective practice group. Each person takes a turn recounting a key event

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see *Innovating for Social Impact*, a framework developed by Community Science (<http://www.communityscience.com>) to strengthen organizational learning and impact.

<sup>4</sup> Raelin, J (2002). “I Don’t Have Time to Think!” versus the Art of Reflective Practice. In *Reflections*, vol. 4, 1, 66-79, Society for Organizational Learning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.

and getting feedback on analyzing it, naming assumptions, making connections, and formulating critical questions that emerge.

- In an organizational or team learning process, individual members identify significant events from their own role or perspective. Then the group engages in collective learning through exploring the connections across these perspectives.

A reflection process is oriented differently according to specific learning needs, but relies on the dynamics of a group. And although any reflection process is about inquiry into experience in order to learn, each is driven by different kinds of questions and will yield different kinds of insights. Reflection focused on individual experience supports the development of how a practitioner thinks and takes action, whereas reflection oriented around collective work supports organizational impact.

### **Reflective practice is driven by questions, dialogue, and stories**

Reflective practice is fundamentally structured around inquiry. It's easier to recognize the importance of allocating time to reflect when it is viewed as a way to gain visibility on an urgent problem or need. To do this, we need to analyze experiences that are relevant to that problem or need. The most powerful "technologies" for examining experience are *storytelling* (narrative accounts of experience) and *dialogue* (thinking out loud together). Journaling is parallel to storytelling and dialogue at the individual level – it lets us capture and analyze our own experience and thinking.

Storytelling and dialogue are effective technologies for reflective practice because they are cognitively complex and culturally powerful systems for conveying the way we think about, feel about, and make connections within our experience.

- By examining a story we tell about a significant event, we build our understanding of what happened and why.
- By engaging in collective dialogue about an event from multiple perspectives, a group can look at the meanings it has taken from that experience and excavate the qualities that made it significant.

Even when there is not a clear problem or question driving reflection, it is through the exploration of stories and the practice of dialogue that we can unpack the richness of experience, and evaluate which issues emerging from that experience we need to pursue. Using reflection, we can identify *learning edges* – those questions or issues that an individual or group needs to understand in order to improve the impact of their work.

### **Why name reflection? Why not just let it happen?**

In the world of work, there are enormous opportunities to learn, yet relatively few structures that support learning from experience, particularly in adulthood and in

the context of work. Every adult reflects to some degree, and everyone, no matter their field, hypothesizes and draws conclusions from the “data” of their experience. Nevertheless, most fields of work do not provide the infrastructure of methods, practices, and processes for building knowledge from practice.

For many practitioners, “doing” swallows up learning. Even doing our best to stay aware of what we are doing does not by itself create high-impact learning. Learning is a purposeful activity. It does not have to be a complicated activity. Recognizing the necessary role of reflection in getting the learning out of experience and becoming familiar with the basic elements of reflective practice allows practitioners to “know what they know” from the experience of their work, and to realize the power of this source of knowledge in furthering their work.

*For more about reflection as a tool in organizational learning systems, read about Innovating for Social Impact at <http://www.communityscience.com> or contact Joy Amulya at [jamulya@communityscience.com](mailto:jamulya@communityscience.com) for more information.*