

## **Understanding the experience of experience: a practical model of reflective practice for Coaching.**

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### **Abstract**

Coaching is inherently a reflective process. Constructivist theories of learning are well established and greatly inform thinking on coaching. The coaching practitioner literature promotes activities and offers many tools to aid reflection. While psychology provides some very pertinent theory, a review of practitioner literature finds little to help coaches understand how reflection actually works. This paper proposes a simple four-cornered model of the mechanism of reflection in coaching. The outcomes are illustrated in application to first hand accounts of reflection in a coaching context. This model is intended to have distinct practical utility, while being embedded in underlying theory.

### **Introduction**

Coaching is inherently a reflective process. Coaching manuals use different terms and language but commonly underline the importance of reflecting back, reframing and questioning (e.g. Starr, 2003; Whitworth *et al*, 1998): all activities that invite the client to look again at how they think, feel and behave. The coaching market appears to accept that this works, and empirical evidence is also building (Grant, 2003). There is also a body of knowledge in the areas of cognitive psychology and learning which examines in detail some of the processes involved. But just how does the action of looking again work in a coaching relationship? Although the theory is there, this is barely examined – at least explicitly - in the coaching practitioner literature. This paper aims to start to build a link between theory and practice in the area of reflection, and offers a practical model for coaches.

Before introducing the structure of the paper, I will attend to definitions. Throughout the study, “reflection” and “reflective practice” are intended in the broad sense to describe any approach that generates individual self-awareness of behaviour or performance. The merits and demerits of different approaches are not considered here. As regards the meaning of “coaching” I follow the general outlook given by Cox & Ledgerwood (2003), namely that coaching is an approach to “helping people increase their sense of self-direction, self-esteem, efficacy and achievement” which is distinguished from mentoring in that it “does not rely necessarily on the specific experience and knowledge of the coach being greater than that of the client” (p4).

The body of the paper is structured as follows: first, I review some of the relevant literature. This includes ideas from both the coaching literature and from contributory theoretical fields. A brief indication of methodology precedes an explanation of a four-

cornered model of reflection. Further reference to some of the ideas coming from the literature is made in this section. The model is then illustrated in relation to case studies. (My own reflections have been used in this section in preference to client reflections, simply to protect their confidentiality.) In one of these, the context is very much in the realm of personal capabilities. Its purpose is to illustrate how the management of reflection can benefit the client. The second example is more directly related to the development of the coach. In the person of a coach with coaching supervision, the two are, of course, intertwined. These illustrations give a more practical understanding of the model and also demonstrate its utility. Conclusions are outlined at the end of the paper.

### **Perspectives on reflection**

Two main perspectives on reflection emerge from the literature. Firstly, there are theoretical and empirical perspectives explaining the function of reflection in learning and change. These provide some powerful indicators of some of the underlying processes of reflection. I have also included with these sources an existing model of the reflective process itself. Secondly there is a certain degree of discussion of reflection specifically in a coaching context, especially in recent texts. These show some significant uptake of the theoretical body of knowledge, but provide little in the way of more explanatory models. These general headings are not entirely exclusive and there are certainly some strong links between the two.

### **Theoretical perspectives on reflection**

Although we are now used to a constructivist interpretation of learning, it is worth setting this in context. The argument for reflective practice can be traced back to the growth of constructivism and the practical difficulties of positivist epistemological stances. Positivism holds that only that which can be directly observed or logically deduced can be understood to be true. This position encourages a kind of reductionism as in order to prove facts research must focus on that which can be controlled. Schön (1991) describes well the resulting divergence of theory from practice and the effect on real-life problem-solving. In what he calls the model of “technical rationality,” which has traditionally prevailed in the preparation of professionals, practitioners, attempting to act on a body of verifiable knowledge, are forced to narrow their practice to such a degree that they are no longer able to solve “whole” problems. Constructivist epistemology, in contrast, implies that learning is interactional (between individual and environment), active (dependent on the individual’s actions) and relative (different for different individuals) (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988).

Building on both the philosophical and theoretical advances of early constructivists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, Kolb’s theory of experiential learning provides a reference point for the development of reflective practice. Kolb defines learning as “*the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*” (Kolb, 1984, p38) in which reflection is an explicit part. Practical applications of reflection have been developed in the fields of teaching (Pollard & Trigg, 1997), nursing (Jarvis, 1992), organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), professional development (Schön, 1991).

Of all these fields of application of reflection, Schön's (1991) descriptive analysis of the development of professional effectiveness is the most readily recognizable in coaching scenarios. Despite the gulf between theory and practice mentioned earlier, Schön notes that many practitioners deal effectively with ambiguity and complexity. They do this not through greater mastery of the body of knowledge, but through "reflecting in action": engaging in a constant process of rapid feedback and adjustment by which skilful operators can adjust to circumstances and sustain high levels of effectiveness. It is an exploratory process rather than a finite act: "Exploratory experiment is the probing, playful activity by which we get a feel for things. It succeeds when it leads to the discovery of something there" (p145) which, according to Schön, requires active attention.

This idea is picked up by Cox (2003) in relation to the professional development of coaching and mentoring practitioners, highlighting the difficulties with competence-based standards in contrast to a constructivist approach that "would nurture professionals through reflection, enquiry and creative action" (p17).

Griffiths & Tann (1991) have further elaborated a model of reflection similar to Kolb's learning cycle by introducing different timeframes, arguing that without a conscious effort, the most immediate reactions to experience can overwhelm the opportunity for deeper consideration and learning. They describe the reflective cycle of action-observation-analysis-evaluation-planning spiralling through five levels or timeframes: rapid reaction (immediate); repair (momentary); review (after the event); research (systematic); and re-theorise/reformulate (formal and rigorous reappraisal).

Turning to the psychology literature, Locke (2002) discusses the relationship between needs (physical, psychological or philosophical), values (which prioritise needs), goals (which operationalise the meeting of needs) and emotions that are "the form in which people experience automatized, subconscious value judgements" (p302). Locke does not discuss reflection specifically, but notes both that "people discover their needs, how to satisfy them and how to anticipate them through reason (thinking)" (p301), and that "errors of introspection may lead people to profess value hierarchies that differ from their conscious hierarchies" (p303). He thereby points to a function of reflection in the areas of both goal-orientation and in attending to emotional responses and their meaning. This also helps explain Griffiths & Tann's (1991) levels.

Carver & Scheier (2001) propose a cybernetic model of feedback in the self-regulation of behaviour. They examine approach loops (towards desirable outcomes) and avoidance loops (away from undesirable outcomes) and argue that positive affect is associated with rate of progress (rather than simply progress) towards goals. They note that avoidance loops are inherently less directional (p52). They also argue that goals are hierarchically structured, "differentiated by level of abstraction" (p67), and that attention may shift towards lower level goals when the effort required to perform them increases (pp74-5). It follows from this that there may be times when the individual is preoccupied with low level goals and/or avoidance behaviours and that at these times less attention is paid to broader, more abstract and more positive goals. This again underlines the influence of attention.

Grant identifies self-reflection and insight as stages within a model of goal-directed self regulation (Grant 2003, p 255). Self-reflection and insight are independent constructs and Grant notes the strong association between self-reflection and psychopathology. In a field test of the *Coach Yourself* (Grant & Greene, 2001) programme, participation was associated with increased goal attainment, quality of life and insight, as well as lowered depression, anxiety, stress and self-reflection. It is important to note that the self-reflection items used in the study were “expressed in a global, trait-like fashion” (p261) and hence do not equate with Kolb’s concept of reflective observation which is a process. Grant notes the potentially counter-productive tendency of trait self-reflexivity when it is not linked to gaining insight and goal achievement:

*It appears that over-engagement in self-reflection may not facilitate goal attainment. This finding serves to remind coaches that life coaching should be a results-oriented solution-focused process, rather than an introspective, overly-philosophical endeavour. (Grant, 2003, p262).*

Reflective practice might be seen as combining the monitoring function of self-reflection and the evaluative function of insight in Grant’s model.

In summary: Kolb provides a fundamental interactional model of learning; this is applied to professional practice in general by Schön and to coaching by Cox (2003); Griffiths & Tann propose a temporal model of reflection; Locke relates learning to goals, and Carver & Scheier explain the function of feedback; Grant tests these processes in a coaching context and finds that reflection must be goal-oriented. Broadly speaking, we therefore have complimentary theories of knowing, theories of application, and theories of change. In the next section, I turn to the coaching practitioner literature to see where these theories have been put into practice.

### **Reflection in coaching practitioner literature**

The coaching practitioner literature is expanding all the time. Rather than review the whole body of literature in this section I have selected some notable examples for the purposes of illustration.

Conceptualisations of the coach in this literature are highly consistent with Schön’s description of reflection. Whitworth *et al* (1998) provide one of many examples of this convergence: “[The coach’s] curiosity allows the client to explore and discover. It opens a wider range of possibility by being more flexible. Curiosity invites the client to look for answers.” (p65) The function of reflective observation is also evidently influential. Whitworth *et al* (1998), recommend posing thought-provoking questions as client homework, “for the purpose of introspection and reflection” (p73).

Echoing Locke’s perspective on values and goals, Rosinski (2003) specifically recommends journaling for the practising coach: “A coaching journal is a valuable tool to help you reflect on your own personal journey, to aid your thinking about what is truly important to you. It is a place where you can capture insights and learn from experience” (p16).

The significant contribution of feedback is explored by a number of writers. Skiffington & Zeus (2003) put heavy emphasis on the feedback loop, describing three steps of their seven step coaching process respectively as “data gathering”, “measurement” and “evaluation”. Similarly, Chapman, Best & Van Casteren (2003) devote a whole chapter to assessment, arguing that it enables insight for the coaching client. This is further extended in a chapter on experiential learning as well as a 360 degree feedback instrument on the coach’s own capability and performance. Kolb’s model is a cornerstone of their approach to experiential learning. They comment that reflective observation is “the most important part of the process from a learning perspective” (p107) and that reflecting on experience through feedback “leads to making sense of that experience in a new way, leading to deeper understanding” (p108). They give a practical example of how this can be self-managed by the client using a learning log (p121).

Zeus & Skiffington (2000) refer to the benefits of self-awareness, its function as a coaching capability and its role in various coaching contexts. They describe how this capability could be developed through diagnostic instruments and mechanisms of feedback. The theme is developed in Skiffington & Zeus (2003) where the same authors argue for helping the client “become aware of their own unique structure of interpretation” (p24), increasing their self awareness, making emotional states more explicit, and developing “mindfulness”, the conscious attention to automatic responses. Flaherty (1999) relates observed behaviours to desired goals and the development of an action plan, proposing a process of self-development for the practising coach founded on self-assessment.

We can see from these examples that the theoretical work relating to reflection certainly feeds through to the practitioner literature. There are numerous tools and practices offered by these writers. Yet there is no simple practical model of how reflecting itself plays such an essential part of the learning process. How does slowing the transformation of experience into knowledge add value for the individual? This is the question for coaching practitioners.

## **Methodology**

The study material is gathered through observation rather than experiment. Data consisted of my own first hand reflections, the reflections of my clients, as well as records of reviews we carried out in coaching sessions. Reflections were recorded at or near the time of the relevant events, expressly as part of a coaching process. Reflections were recorded in writing and structured under the following headings “What happened and why?” “My reaction (thoughts, feelings, behaviours)”; “What did I learn/discover?”; “What am I going to do about it?”

The model was developed through an iterative search for meaningful explanations for the impact of each reflection. In as sense, simply asking the question “Why did this help?” The resulting model is inevitably conditioned by my prior knowledge and preference.

The model has been applied to two case studies for illustration purposes. Identities have been obscured in each account and the accounts appear with the consent of the individuals mentioned therein.

### **A four-cornered model**

This model is intended to explain the process of reflective practice: the *ways* in which I believe reflection contributes to individual learning. These are fourfold: *Balance* by activating less preferred learning styles; *Objectivity* by distancing the subject from immediate emotional response; *Perspective* by framing events in the context of strategic objectives; and *Capability* by rehearsing the skill of reflection itself. After presenting the model, I have then applied it to two specific recorded reflections in the following section.

#### **1. Balance: activating less preferred learning styles**

The learning cycle and a system of learning style preferences were developed by Kolb from the work of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget. They have been further operationalised by Honey & Mumford (1993). As noted above, Kolb (1984) characterised the learning process as “transformational”. He argues that higher order learning is achieved through the combination of prehensional and transformational processes and that the longer the string of processes through which the knowledge is passed, the higher the order of learning. “Reflective observation” or “transformation via intension” (Kolb 1984, p42) is itself one of these processes. Typically operating on concrete experience, reflection creates an expectation of how the world works and, in turn, a desire to test that expectation: “It is in this interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs. In Hegel’s phrase, ‘Any experience that does not violate expectation is not worthy of the name experience’”(Kolb, 1984, p28).

Formalised reflection therefore stimulates the other learning processes, and can serve particularly to enrich the learning of an individual who has a strong preference for other styles.

At another level of analysis, formalised reflection can be seen to trigger even more profound change regardless of current learning styles. This is at the level of reflection as part of the process of learning about learning and is effectively the drawing of the individual’s own learning processes into their conscious awareness, thereby opening the possibility of conscious decision-making about learning.

Both these effects will be illustrated in the ‘case story’ examples.

#### **2. Objectivity: distancing the subject from immediate emotional response**

A second effect of reflection is that it brings events back to attention at a time when immediate emotional content is less predominant.

Goleman notes that the more primitive emotional responses to environmental stimuli are less conscious and are less consciously controlled than are higher order cognitive processes. These are typically instinctive responses to threat and danger and trigger hormonal reactions which prepare the body for fight or flight. They are immediate and

overpowering (Goleman, 1996). While many immediate threats to survival have been removed from modern life, these responses also occur at a second level as a response to psychological threat: particularly threat to self-image (defensiveness) and to adopted schemas (resistance). These more modern threats generate similar hormonal responses and while emotions are an important element of cognition, they are by definition irrational. Kegan and Lahey (2001) describe one of the roots of resistance to change as “competing commitments”: deeply held beliefs which people are not necessarily able to articulate, not least because they are “very personal, reflecting vulnerabilities that people fear will undermine how they are regarded both by others and themselves” (p88). Locke’s “automatized, subconscious value judgements” (Locke, 2002, p302) is another way of putting it.

Reflection creates the opportunity to consider experience ‘objectively’ from a distance. It allows the individual to return to events at a time when they are more able to be free of conditioned or instinctive emotional responses. They are therefore better able to understand more of what has happened and to draw more accurate conclusions from that event.

### **3. Perspective: framing events in the context of strategic objectives**

A third effect of structured reflection is to allow the individual to consider events not just in the context of the immediate situation and relationships, but in the context of goals they wish to pursue. This is predicted by Carver & Scheier (2001), and Grant (2003), as discussed earlier.

*Perspective* is related to the *objectivity* effect: both are about moving up Griffiths & Tann’s (1991) levels. *Perspective* is more particularly the benefit of relating incidents to longer-term objectives. Reviewing incidents with *perspective* poses the question “What do you really want?” It is differentiated from the *objectivity* effect because it is this goal-orientation which will encourage the individual to re-enter uncomfortable situations with a view to generating longer-term benefits. Potentially, the context of strategic objectives can become a habitual and immediate mode of thinking.

### **4. Capability: rehearsing the skill of reflection**

Finally, structured reflection through the effect of rehearsal creates a more accessible habit or *capability* of reflection. This enables the individual to manage their immediate responses to events, not as a question of resolve, but because they become more able to reflect in the moment. Because they have the practical experience of doing so, they are more able, more automatically and more rapidly, to cycle through the levels described by Griffiths & Tann (1991), to become a “reflective practitioner” in Schön’s (1991) sense. This, of itself, helps them to respond more positively and constructively to circumstances.

### **Applying the model to accounts of reflection**

As described earlier, I now present two example ‘case story’ reflections from my own learning drawn from a period early in my own coaching practice. For each example I have given an outline of the context and the scenario, my own reactions, then an analysis based on the framework set out above.

The first event was a meeting with a close contact (J) who was professionally active in a particular field of coaching. I visited J's office expecting a friendly lunch, but, on being introduced to J's business colleague had found myself in a situation for which I was unprepared. I was unsure how to respond and found myself working hard to present myself as knowledgeable and competent. I was uncomfortable at the time, and no less so when J fed back subsequently that I had "missed an opportunity" to learn something significant about business from his colleague. I had talked too much and not listened enough. In the context of my professional experience the impact of this feedback was at best upsetting.

My reaction at the time was that I had felt "ambushed" and let down by J. In part I felt angry, but there was ambivalence as J's intention was clearly to help me out, he is a close supporter and is someone whose opinion I respect. Without reflection, I believe that is where my thinking would have stayed. The strength of feeling, however, was a clear indicator that here was valuable raw material for reflection: an experience that violated expectation!

I recorded the circumstances and the reaction described above, then considered what I could learn from the incident. Through reflection, I was able to consider some rational aspects of the event (*Objectivity*). Firstly, this was an example of a very normal business situation: one runs into opportunities to network and learn from the experience of others at the most unlikely of moments, and in the end this was not the most unlikely of moments. I could choose to be more comfortable with this kind of situation. I had to accept, therefore, that it was an event to learn from. I could also see (*Perspective*) that what I chose to do and say had not best supported my wider agenda which on this occasion was to develop a knowledge of a certain market. I could also see that J might have been disappointed himself that I had not benefited as well as I might from his support. Clearly, these reflections together gave me the opportunity to see the situation in a far more constructive light than I had been able to at the time. I came to the conclusion (whether it is right or wrong is a discussion for elsewhere) that it is easy to miss opportunities when behaviour is driven by defensiveness. This observation itself became hugely informative on some future occasions (*Capability*) where it helped me to gain a far more positive outcome from a difficult situation than I would otherwise have done. In terms of *balance* in learning styles, I believe the reflection helped me to avoid a conditioned and self-fulfilling "theorist" response. The archetypal "theorist" response to this discomfort would be to withdraw, seek a definitive answer, and avoid a repetition. The reflection note allowed me to see the event differently ("reflector"), to frame future events more positively, and to plan my approach to them ("pragmatist"), if nothing more, to generate learning opportunities ("activist").

Although this was a relatively small incident, it was recorded formally and illustrates well the functions of reflection proposed in the model above. While based on an event outside my coaching practice, it clearly has important practical and professional implications. It illustrates the benefit and power of reflection.

The second example is drawn from an experimental coaching relationship established with a volunteer (K) with whom I was already acquainted: a situation which made it easy to overlook some of the essential rapport-building steps such as agreeing a way of working

together and agreeing a formal contract (as described by Megginson & Clutterbuck 1995, p31).

Throughout the first session, K presented her issues: she felt she wanted to end up "somewhere else" professionally. At the same time, she talked a great deal about how comfortable and successful she was presently, and the considerable downsides of setting off in a new direction. These ideas were so intertwined that in response to my questions, she focused heavily on how positive were her current circumstances. She also frequently underlined that she was only able (or prepared) to undertake the minimum of work between coaching sessions. She seemed pleased by the impenetrable nature of her dilemma, and even, to divert the conversation from any possibility of progress.

This is a familiar coaching problem and, indeed is predicted by Megginson & Clutterbuck (1995) as a feature of the rapport-building stage. Nevertheless, my main responses were of anger, confusion and depression. I felt I was being toyed with and tested, that K was drawing me into her conundrum (a common phenomenon), not with the desire to be helped, but to prove that I was unable to help her. This was personal. I was also at a loss as to how to progress and I thought about terminating the experiment. I was grateful for the support of my own coach at this point who helped start the reflective process.

Again, the reflection immediately brought the benefit of some *Objectivity*. In this case I was able to appreciate the familiar patterns that were being played out in the session: the client wishes to embrace new challenges at the same time as being reluctant to let go of what she has already built up; as there is a cost to making progress, there is also an element of ambivalence around the process; K is a successful person with a keen critical eye, and as such might be expected to enter more slowly into a change process. Peculiar to this relationship, I also realised that because of our existing acquaintance, I had failed to contract my role effectively. Seen in this way, clearly none of these dynamics is as personal as I had experienced them at the time.

Reflection also allowed me to address the problem from the *Perspective* of strategic objectives. I had wished to develop and test the feasibility of a particular approach to coaching and it was in that context that the coaching relationship had been agreed. These were explicit goals that risked being lost in my immediate response. I used the ABCDE model (Palmer, 1997) to support my reflection by exploring my own thinking on what might lie behind my emotional responses, that is, any implicit goals motivating my behaviour. This strongly informed my conclusion to return very consciously to my adopted process. It also allowed me better to plan for future sessions (and thereby benefit from greater *Balance* of learning styles) and during that session, I was able to recall these analyses and to react more positively to circumstances (*Capability*).

These case studies illustrate both the model itself and its practical utility. It is possible to encourage reflection, not just because it is a good thing, or because it is part of learning, but with these specific outcomes in mind.

## Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, the constructivist model of learning is widely accepted: dealing first hand with problem-solving creates more durable and yet more adaptable schemata than is possible with instructional techniques alone, and furthermore, that some form of reflection is an essential part of accommodating or assimilating experience. These perspectives are close to the heart of coaching. Cognitive psychology further provides us with insight into how feedback, attention and self-awareness relate to individual change. At the same time, the practitioner literature promotes activity in these areas and offers some tools. How does the four-cornered model add to this?

A business associate recently told me how, after years of avidly absorbing self-help and self-improvement literature, he was embarking on the study of psychology in an attempt to make sense of all the conflicting advice, yet the fundamental science seemed difficult to apply. Practical implementation is like the sail of a yacht, I suggested. It catches the wind. Theory and science are like the keel. It is what keeps you going in the right direction.

The four-cornered model presented in this paper brings those two essential functions together. It provides a method of understanding that is sufficiently linked to both theory and to the reality of practice. Reflection works because it helps the learner to *Balance* the process of learning from experience and to generate new learning opportunities; it affords them an *Objective* stance; it helps them see their actions from the *Perspective* of their overall goals; and it helps them to develop the *Capability* to react more quickly and effectively to future challenges. These benefits are demonstrable in a coaching context and may provide an understanding of the importance of reflection to support and guide coaching practice.

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