

## Support for reflective writing/learning (1. Using The Park exercise)

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### Introduction

The first instruction is to turn the pages of this handout *only* as you need to. Do not look ahead of where you are in it or you will reduce the value of your learning from it.

### Some resources

Two relevant books by Jenny Moon both published by Routledge are:

- A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning (2004)
- Learning Journals, a handbook for reflective learning and professional development (2006)

A website from which electronic copies of exercises etc can be freely obtained (as well as other material on teaching and learning): [www.cemp.ac.uk/people/jennymoon.php](http://www.cemp.ac.uk/people/jennymoon.php)

### Reflective writing

We learn from reflecting on what has happened. We can reflect on what went wrong or right and why, what we might do to improve the situation next time or how to change the context and so on. One representation of reflective learning is reflective writing though we can reflect in drawing, making music, miming etc - but I mainly refer to reflective writing here. Sometimes the writing will be 'one off' or it might be in the context of an ongoing reflective journal or a blog etc.

This basic handout will take you through an exercise that will help you to understand what reflective learning is, what it looks like on the page, and how to deepen it. When first asked to do reflective writing, many people do not know what is meant – and that can apply to anyone. Once that is overcome, the next issue is usually that the reflective writing is descriptive and superficial and as such it does not help a great deal with learning. The exercise below is designed to overcome both issues. It is not an exercise just to do and throw away. It is one to come back to a number of times. As you learn more about reflective learning, there is more to learn from the exercise.

### Definitions of reflection

There are many definitions of reflection in the literature. For most of those who are required to engage in reflective learning, definition does not matter – you need to show that you can 'do it'. The multitude of different definitions results from the fact that reflection is a constructed term to describe a general area of human function which probably includes an array of cognitive activities. Because this exercise is based on my work and therefore on the definition that I use, I give you my simple definition.

Reflection is a form of mental processing - like a form of thinking - that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. Alternatively we may simply 'be reflective', and then an outcome can be unexpected. The term 'reflection' is applied to relatively complex or ill-structured ideas for which there is not

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an obvious solution and it largely refers to the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. Emotion is involved in various ways.

In academic situations there is more to say:

In academic contexts the notion of reflection has been developed as a tool to support learning. In an academic context, reflection is likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome that is specified in terms of learning, action or clarification. The academic reflection may be preceded by a description of the purpose and / or the subject matter of the reflection. The process and outcome of the reflective work is most likely to be in a represented (eg written) form and to be seen by others and to be assessed. These factors can affect its nature and quality. (From Moon, 2004)

Metaphors can be helpful too and I particularly like this idea from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (J.K. Rowling, 2000: London, Bloomsbury) in the way that it suggests that we reflect (largely) on what we know already.

‘Harry stared at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original silvery white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

“What is it?” Harry asked shakily.

“This? It is called a pensieve”, said Dumbledore. “I sometimes find - and I am sure that you know the feeling - that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.”

“Er”, said Harry, who couldn’t truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

“At these times”, said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form” (pp518 – 9)

We re-organise our minds as we reflect - I call it ‘cognitive housekeeping’. As we reorganize our minds, we learn more.

## The Exercise

**The ideal way** to do this exercise is in a small group so that you can learn from the discussions that are involved. If you do it on your own, the discussions will have to be with yourself. Do hold them! The **basis of the exercise** is a story that is reiterated in four accounts. Each of the accounts is written at a deeper level of reflection – you could say that they become progressively more profound in the level of thinking. The concept of ‘depth’ is based on research (Moon, 2004 – see website for reference). In terms of **equipment**, each person will need these pages. If you are doing the exercise on paper, a highlighter pen would be useful.

**The process: read Account 1** of The Park (below). It is descriptive and not very reflective at all, but look out for anything in the way it is written that is, in your view, reflective and note / underline / highlight it. If you are in a group, you need to be very clear that when you are reading, no-one talks. When you have finished reading Account 1, go back over it and think again where it is or is not reflective. If you are working with a group, you will need to agree when you have all read it and are ready to talk (don’t be tempted to read the next account as you wait!). Then discuss where the account is and is not reflective for about three to four minutes. **Then read Account 2**, again in silence – and then think about / discuss how reflective it is and where it is reflective.

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Then do the same with **Accounts 3 and 4**. As you deal with more reflective accounts (3 and 4) you will need longer for discussion after the reading – maybe up to five minutes. And, incidentally, the accounts are of different lengths.

This exercise is not exact science – you do not need to agree on what is reflective, and the idea is that you will learn from each other. There is no list of right and wrong answers!

**The next stage:** when you have read through to Account 4 and have discussed it, think about or discuss (if you are in a group) what it is that changes in the nature of the writing and thinking of this person in the four accounts. Clearly it is not just one thing that changes – there are a number of things that make that make the fourth account a deeper level of reflection than the first. Try to develop a list of those changes (I call them ‘shifts’). They do not all start ‘shifting’ in Account 1. Some of the changes are really only represented in Accounts 3 and 4. You could try to depict the changes in a graphic representation – picture, diagram.... The main thing is to identify what changes are occurring.

## The Park

### The Park (Account 1)

I went through the park the other day. The sun shone sometimes but large clouds floated across the sky in a breeze. It reminded me of a time that I was walking on St David’s Head in Wales – when there was a hard and bright light and anything I looked at was bright. It was really quite hot – so much nicer than the day before which was rainy. I went over to the children’s playing field. I had not been there for a while and wanted to see the improvements. There were several children there and one, in particular, I noticed, was in too many clothes for the heat. The children were running about and this child became red in the face and began to slow down and then he sat. He must have been about 10. Some of the others called him up again and he got to his feet. He stumbled into the game for a few moments, tripping once or twice. It seemed to me that he had just not got the energy to lift his feet. Eventually he stumbled down and did not get up but he was still moving and he shuffled into a half sitting and half lying position watching the other children and I think he was calling out to them. I don’t know.

Anyway, I had to get on to get to the shop to buy some meat for the chilli that my children had asked for for their party. The twins had invited many friends round for an end-of-term celebration of the beginning of the summer holidays. They might think that they have cause to celebrate but it makes a lot more work for me when they are home. I find that their holiday time makes a lot more work.

It was the next day when the paper came through the door – in it there was a report of a child who had been taken seriously ill in the park the previous day. He was fighting for his life in hospital and they said that the seriousness of the situation was due to the delay before he was brought to hospital. The report commented on the fact that he had been lying unattended for half an hour before someone saw him. By then the other children had gone. It said that that several passers-by might have seen him looking ill and even on the ground and the report went on to ask why passers-by do not take action when they see that something is wrong. The article was headed ‘Why do they ‘Walk on by’? I have been terribly upset since then. James says I should not worry – it is just a headline.

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## The Park (2)

I went to the park the other day. I was going to the supermarket to get some meat to make the chilli that I had promised the children. They were having one of their end-of-term celebrations with friends. I wonder what drew me to the playground and why I ended up standing and watching those children playing with a rough old football? I am not sure as I don't usually look at other people's children – I just did. Anyway there were a number of kids there. I noticed, in particular, one child who seemed to be very overdressed for the weather. I try now to recall what he looked like - his face was red. He was a boy of around 10 – not unlike Charlie was at that age – maybe that is why I noticed him to start with when he was running around with the others. But then he was beginning to look distressed. I felt uneasy about him – sort of maternal but I did not do anything. What could I have done? I remember thinking, I had little time and the supermarket would get crowded. What a strange way of thinking, in the circumstances!

In retrospect I wish I had acted. I ask myself what stopped me - but I don't know what I might have done at that point. Anyway he sat down, looking absolutely exhausted and as if he had no energy to do anything. A few moments later, the other children called him up to run about again. I felt more uneasy and watched as he got up and tried to run, then fell, ran again and fell and half sat and half lay. Still I did nothing more than look – what was going on with me?

Eventually I went on I tell myself now that it was really important to get to the shops. It was the next day when the paper came through the door that I had a real shock. In the paper there was a report of a child who had been taken seriously ill in the park the previous day. He was fighting for his life in the hospital and the situation was much more serious because there had been such a delay in getting help. The report commented on the fact that he had been lying, unattended, for half an hour or more. At first, I wondered why the other children had not been more responsible. The article went on to say that several passers-by might have seen him playing and looking ill and the report questioned why passers-by do not take action when they see that something is wrong.

The event has affected me for some days but I do not know where to go or whom to tell. I do want to own up to my part in it to someone though.

## The Park (3)

The incident happened in Ingle Park and it is very much still on my mind. There was a child playing with others. He looked hot and unfit and kept sitting down but the other children kept on getting him back up and making him play with them. I was on my way to the shop and only watched the children for a while before I walked on. Next day it was reported in the paper that the child had been taken to hospital seriously ill – very seriously ill. The report said that there were several passers-by in the park who had seen the child looking ill and who had done nothing. It was a scathing report about those who do not take action in such situations.

Reading the report, I felt dreadful and it has been very difficult to shift the feelings. I did not stop to see to the child because I told myself that I was on my way to the shops to buy food for a meal that I had to cook for the children's party – what do I mean that *I had to* cook it?. Though I saw that the child was ill, I didn't do anything. It is hard to say what I was really thinking at the time – to what degree I was determined to go on with my day in the way I had planned it (the party really was not that important was it?). Or did I genuinely not think that the boy was ill – but just over-dressed and a bit tired? To what extent did I try to make convenient excuses and

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to what extent was my action based on an attempt to really understand the situation? Looking back, I could have cut through my excuses at the time – rather than now.

I did not go over to the child and ask what was wrong but I should have done. I could have talked to the other children - and even got one of the other children to call for help. I am not sure if the help would have been ambulance or doctor at that stage – but it does not matter now. If he had been given help then, he might not be fighting for his life.

It would be helpful to me if I could work out what I was really thinking and why I acted as I did. This event has really shaken me to my roots – more than I would have expected. It made me feel really guilty. I do not usually do wrong, in fact I think of myself as a good person. This event is also making me think about actions in all sorts of areas of my life. It reminds me of some things in the past as when my uncle died – but then again I don't really think that that is relevant - he was going to die anyway. My bad feelings then were due to sheer sadness and some irrational regrets that I did not visit him on the day before. Strangely it also reminds me of how bad I felt when Charlie was ill while we went on that anniversary weekend away. As I think more about Charlie being ill, I recognise that there are commonalities in the situations. I also keep wondering if I knew that boy....

#### **The Park (4)**

It happened in Ingle Park and this event is very much still on my mind. It feels significant. There was a child playing with others. He looked hot and unfit and kept sitting down but the other children kept on getting him back up and making him play with them. I was on my way to the shop and only watched the children for a while before I walked on. Next day it was reported in the paper that the child had been taken to hospital seriously ill – very seriously ill. The report said that there were several passers-by in the park who had seen the child looking ill and who had done nothing. It was a scathing report about those who do not take action in such situation.

It was the report initially that made me think more deeply. It kept coming back in my mind and over the next few days - I began to think of the situation in lots of different ways. Initially I considered my urge to get to the shop – regardless of the state of the boy. That was an easy way of excusing myself – to say that I had to get to the shop. Then I began to go through all of the agonising as to whether I could have mis-read the situation and really thought that the boy was simply over-dressed or perhaps play-acting or trying to gain sympathy from me or the others. Could I have believed that the situation was all right? All of that thinking, I now notice, would also have let me off the hook – made it not my fault that I did not take action at the time.

I talked with Tom about my reflections on the event – on the incident, on my thinking about it at the time and then immediately after. He observed that my sense of myself as a 'good person who always lends a helping hand when others need help' was put in some jeopardy by it all. At the time and immediately after, it might have been easier to avoid shaking my view of myself than to admit that I had avoided facing up to the situation and admitting that I had not acted as 'a good person'. With this hindsight, I notice that I can probably find it more easy to admit that I am not always 'a good person' and that I made a mistake in retrospect than immediately after the event. I suspect that this may apply to other situations.

As I think about the situation now, I recall some more of the thoughts – or were they feelings mixed up with thoughts? I remember a sense at the time that this boy looked quite scruffy and reminded me of a child who

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used to play with Charlie. We did not feel happy during the brief period of their friendship because this boy was known as a bully and we were uneasy either that Charlie would end up being bullied, or that Charlie would learn to bully. Funnily enough we were talking about this boy – I now remember – at the dinner table the night before. The conversation had reminded me of all of the angonising about the children’s friends at the time. The fleeting thought / feeling was possibly something like this:– if this boy is like one I did not feel comfortable with – then maybe he deserves to get left in this way. Maybe he was a brother of the original child. I remember social psychology research along the lines of attributing blame to victims to justify their plight. Then it might not have been anything to do with Charlie’s friend.

So I can see how I looked at that event and perhaps interpreted it in a manner that was consistent with my emotional frame of mind at the time. Seeing the same events without that dinner-time conversation might have led me to see the whole thing in an entirely different manner and I might have acted differently. The significance of this whole event is chilling when I realise that my lack of action nearly resulted in his death – and it might have been because of an attitude that was formed years ago in relation to a different situation.

This has all made me think about how we view things. The way I saw this event at the time was quite different to the way I see it now – even this few days later. Writing an account at the time would have been different to the account – or several accounts that I would write now. I cannot know what ‘story’ is ‘true’. The bullying story may be one that I have constructed retrospectively - fabricated. Interestingly I can believe that story completely.

**You have finished reading all the accounts** when you get here, but please do not turn over – discuss this last account then think about the changes across all the accounts that represent deepening reflection (see above). When you have listed the changes that occur in the accounts you can turn over. There is more...



**Now - firstly** I give you the list of shifts in depth that I think are important in describing the differences between the first and fourth accounts

**In deepening reflection, there are shifts:**

- from description to reflective account;
- from no questions to questions to responding to questions;
- emotional influence is recognised, and then handled increasingly effectively
- there is a 'standing back from the event'
- there is a shift from self questioning, challenge to own ideas
- from recognition of relevance of prior experience
- in the taking into account of others' views
- towards metacognition - review of own reflective processes

**Secondly**, you may find this commentary on the reflective content of the accounts helpful:

**Commentary**

**The Park (1)** *This piece tells the story. Sometimes it mentions past experiences, sometimes anticipates the future but all in the context of the account of the story. There might be references to emotional state, but the role of the emotions on action is not explored. Ideas of others are mentioned but not elaborated or used to investigate the meaning of the events. The account is written only from one point of view – that of Annie. Generally ideas are presented in a sequence and are only linked by the story. They are not all relevant or focused. In fact – you could hardly deem this to be reflective at all. It is very descriptive. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that could serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though it hardly signals any material for reflection – other than the last few words*

**The Park (2)** *In this account there is a description of the same events. There is very little addition of ideas from outside the event – reference to attitudes of others, comments. The account is more than a story though. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question to be asked and answered. In the questioning there is recognition of the worth of exploring the motives for behaviour – but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events. Annie is critical of her actions and in her questions, signals this. The questioning of action does mean that Annie is standing back from the event to a small extent. There is a sense that she recognises that this is a significant incident, with learning to be gained – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.*

**The Park (3)** *The description is succinct here – just sufficient to raise the issues. Extraneous information is not added. It is not a story. The focus is on the attempt to reflect on the event and to learn from it. There is more of a sense of Annie standing back from the event in order to reflect better on her actions and in order to be more effectively critical. There is more analysis of the situation and an evident understanding that it was not a simple situation – that there might be alternative explanations or actions that could be justified equally effectively. The description could be said to be slightly narrow (see The Park (4)) as Annie is not acknowledging that there might be other ways of perceiving the situation – other points of view. She does not seem to be recognising that her reflection is affected by her frame of reference at the time or now. It is possible, for*

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example, that her experience with Charlie (last paragraph) – or her question about knowing the boy have influenced the manner in which she reacted. It might not just be a matter of linking up other events, but of going beyond and checking out the possibility that her frame of reference might have been affected by the prior experiences.

**The Park (4)** The account is succinct and to the point. There is some deep reflection here that is self-critical and questions the basis of the beliefs and values on which the behaviour was based. There is evidence of standing back from the event, of Annie treating herself as an object acting within the context. There is also an internal dialogue – a conversation with herself in which she proposes and further reflects on alternative explanations. She shows evidence of looking at the views of others (Tom) and of considering the alternative point of view, and learning from it. She recognises the significance of the effect of passage of time on her reflection – eg that her personal frame of reference at the time may have influenced her actions and that a different frame of reference might have lead to different results. She notices that the proximity of other, possibly unrelated events (the dinner-time conversation) have an effect either possibly on her actual behaviour and her subsequent reflection – or possibly on her reflective processes only. She notices that she can be said to be reconstructing the event in retrospect – creating a story around it that may not be ‘true’. She recognises that there may be no conclusion to this situation – but that there are still things to be learnt from it. She has also been able to reflect on her own process of reflecting (acted metacognitively), recognising that her process influenced the outcome.

**And thirdly** there is a framework that supports this and other exercises like it. This generic framework should help you to write reflectively and to judge how reflective your writing is.

## A Generic Framework for Reflective Writing

There are four ‘levels’ of depth of reflection described below. They do not necessarily accord directly with the accounts in exercises such as ‘The Park’ but provide an general guide.

### Descriptive Writing

This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection. It may tell a story but from one point of view at a time and generally one point at a time is made. Ideas tend to be linked by the sequence of the account / story rather than by meaning. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.

There may be references to emotional reactions but they are not explored and not related to behaviour.

The account may relate to ideas or external information, but these are not considered or questioned and the possible impact on behaviour or the meaning of events is not mentioned.

There is little attempt to focus on particular issues. Most points are made with similar weight.

The writing could hardly be deemed to be reflective at all. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that would serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though a good description that precedes reflective accounts will tend to be more focused and to signal points and issues for further reflection.

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### **Descriptive account with some reflection**

This is a descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection.

The basic account is descriptive in the manner of description above. There is little addition of ideas from outside the event, reference to alternative viewpoints or attitudes to others, comment and so on. However, the account is more than just a story. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question or there are questions to be asked and answered. Points on which reflection could occur are signalled.

There is recognition of the worth of further exploring but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

The questioning does begin to suggest a 'standing back from the event' in (usually) isolated areas of the account.

The account may mention emotional reactions, or be influenced by emotion. Any influence may be noted, and possibly questioned.

There is a sense of recognition this is an incident from which learning can be gained, – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

### **Reflective writing (1)**

There is description but it is focused with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. There may be a sense that the material is being mulled around. It is no longer a straight-forward account of an event, but it is definitely reflective.

There is evidence of external ideas or information and where this occurs, the material is subjected to reflection.

The account shows some analysis and there is recognition of the worth of exploring motives or reasons for behaviour

Where relevant, there is willingness to be critical of the action of self or others. There is likely to be some self questioning and willingness also to recognise the overall effect of the event on self. In other words, there is some 'standing back' from the event.

There is recognition of any emotional content, a questioning of its role and influence and an attempt to consider its significance in shaping the views presented.

There may be recognition that things might look different from other perspectives, that views can change with time or the emotional state. The existence of several alternative points of view may be acknowledged but not analysed.

In other words, in a relatively limited way the account may recognise that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time but it does not deal with this in a way that links it effectively to issues about the quality of personal judgement.

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## Reflective writing (2)

Description now only serves the process of reflection, covering the issues for reflection and noting their context. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and internal dialogue.

The account shows deep reflection, and it incorporates a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change.

A metacognitive stance is taken (ie critical awareness of one's own processes of mental functioning – including reflection).

The account probably recognises that events exist in a historical or social context that may be influential on a person's reaction to them. In other words, multiple perspectives are noted.

Self questioning is evident (an 'internal dialogue' is set up at times) deliberating between different views of personal behaviour and that of others).

The view and motives of others are taken into account and considered against those of the writer.

There is recognition of the role of emotion in shaping the ideas and recognition of the manner in which different emotional influences can frame the account in different ways.

There is recognition that prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of current behaviour.

There is observation that there is learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted.

There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing.

**The exercise is devised by Jenny Moon, CEMP, Bournemouth University.** If you want to copy it or use it or modify it, feel free to do so – there are no copyright issues. The best thing to do is to write your own accounts – perhaps using the framework as a guide if it works for you. There are other similar exercises (some with three parts rather than four but all based on the same framework) on the website listed under **Resources** at the top of this handout