

Art and Science of Reflection

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Introduction – Why We Don't Reflect?

Undeniably, modern man does not reflect enough. There are many explanations on why this form of decisive thinking has been ignored in our country. To begin with, the education system and the hierarchical nature of society systematically discourages creativity, questioning, self-interrogation and critical thinking. All important decisions in one's life – schooling, college, career, marriage, whatever, is taken by other people. A disempowered individual cannot reflect.

Second, the biggest casualty of modernization and consumerism has been the alienation and death of the self. Consequently, we are driven more by pleasure and power than purpose in life. Money is the antidote to suffering and power is an aphrodisiac. Such is the belief.

Third, when boredom sets in, life becomes one unending stream of activity. We are constantly on the treadmill, running from one activity to another. Our runaway life has no tactical or strategic pauses, no time-outs. We are afraid to think because thinking is painful; it is the death of our illusions. We are forever stuck in fast-forward that leaves little or no time for leisure, for contemplation.

I am reminded of the famous experiment on procession caterpillars by the French naturalist, Jean Henri Fabre. He lined the caterpillars around a flower pot in a circle and started them off in their procession. They went round and round the flower pot for three days non-stop. On the fourth day he placed some pine needles, food for the caterpillars, in the centre of the pot. But the caterpillars continued going round and round the flower pot without eating the pine needles. On the seventh day they dropped dead from starvation and exhaustion, despite food being six inches away. The lesson was clear: they had confused activity with accomplishment!

And finally, critical thinking does not form part of schooling and college education, or for that matter, even in work life. Very few are lucky to have been educated on its criticality and processes.

Philosophical Origins of Reflection

In order to be a practitioner of reflection, it is essential to understand the philosophical underpinnings of reflection. The origins go back to Socrates and Eastern religions, the Upanishads, in particular. At his trial for heresy, Socrates rightly said, "***The unexamined life***

is not worth living.” He was on trial for exhorting his students to challenge accepted beliefs of the time and think for themselves. He was put to death because he declined to give up his pursuit for truth despite being offered an honourable exile.

The key in leading an examined life is reflection. While serving in the military I did not lead an examined life, and the greatest spurt in my intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth came around the age of 55. At that time I was commanding a corps as my last assignment before seeking premature retirement after serving for over 37 years. I soon realized that “hierarchy-mindedness” can turn one into an arrogant individual who seldom introspects.

The origins of reflection can also be traced back to the concept of **non-dualism** in the Upanishads. Non-dualism is based on the philosophy that life is not bi-polar; it is indivisible. For example, happiness and misery are not opposites. Life and death are not opposites. They are two sides of the same coin. You can't be happy unless you have experienced unhappiness. In the Upanishads, God is within man – *Aham Brahmasmi*. Even Jesus Christ was non-dualistic when he proclaimed that the Kingdom Of God is within you. Life is not black and white, and understanding the bright and dark sides of life requires intense reflection.

Purpose of Reflection

I went to wars in 1965 and 1971. I fought insurgencies in Sri Lanka and Kashmir; but there was no transformation in me. It was much later, at the age of 55, while commanding a corps in Ladakh that, I learnt how to reflect. Had it not been for the experience in conducting a successful socio-political campaign to win over alienated communities into the national mainstream, this may not have been possible. **An experience without deep reflection is meaningless.** A corollary to this is that unless an experience is ‘crucible,’ the trigger for reflection will not be powerful enough to start the thinking process.

Reflection is a thinking process for communicating inwardly to think back on what one has done, how well one did it, and what one might do better. The process of reflection is a dialogue with oneself in coming to terms with reality. This is possible provided we slow down and find solitude – time to spend with our self, to contemplate. Self-dialogue enables **personal growth and the quest for excellence.**

Reflection facilitates **lifelong learning**, especially self-knowledge. We know so much about everything else in life, but very little about ourselves. Every experience, provided it is emotionally powerful, creates cognitive dissonance and helps in unlearning and re-learning. Reflection enables critical examination and evaluation of one's experiences with a view to developing teachable points of view that can be applied in real-life situations. In its deep application, reflection must lead to the transformation of an individual as a result of a crucible experience.

Reflection is a great learning tool to **train oneself to be a leader**. You become your own guru. The reflective process makes one aware of one's strengths, weaknesses, and prejudices. It challenges one's assumptions, changes one's world view, and gives a set of teachable points of view that ultimately lead to one's transformation.

Process of Reflection

There are two essential processes for reflection. The first is basic and it addresses daily learning an individual confronts such as classroom learning, workshops, seminars, outdoor projects and experiences, reading books, films, visual art, and even ideas. A basic model does not necessarily lead to transformation. Its more about change. A simple format for reflection is suggested below.

What preparations did I make for this session?

What was the most interesting thing I read or experienced – why was that?

What were the three main things I learnt?

What did I previously think was true, but now know to be wrong?

What was new and surprising to me?

What have I changed my mind about as a result of the experience?

One thing that I have learnt that I can use in the future?

I am still unsure about.

What would I like to study in more detail?

Suitable Conditions for Reflection

1. Leisure time for contemplation.
2. Set aside prime time to reflect as often as possible.
3. “You don't know what you know till you have written them down.”
4. Inter disciplinary reading.
5. Annotate books/ articles as you read.
6. Maintain Reflective Journal.
7. Develop a set of teachable points of view.
8. May need the help of a mentor to help you make sense of a crucible experience.

However, the second format for deeper reflection on crucible experiences is more detailed and scientific, and requires training. **Reflection is not merely an act of thinking; it must transform the person.** This model of reflection may initially need the help of a mentor to help in making sense of the experience. Transformation will occur provided one reflects over an experience that is crucible. The experience need not be direct. Even meeting great leaders, interacting with proven mentors, reading evocative books, or watching a powerful film, can be transformational. Crucible experiences are experiences that are emotively so powerful that they lead to change in one's identity – a new vision, and a new mission in life.

Reflection is a process that ends in transformation. See Figure 1 below.

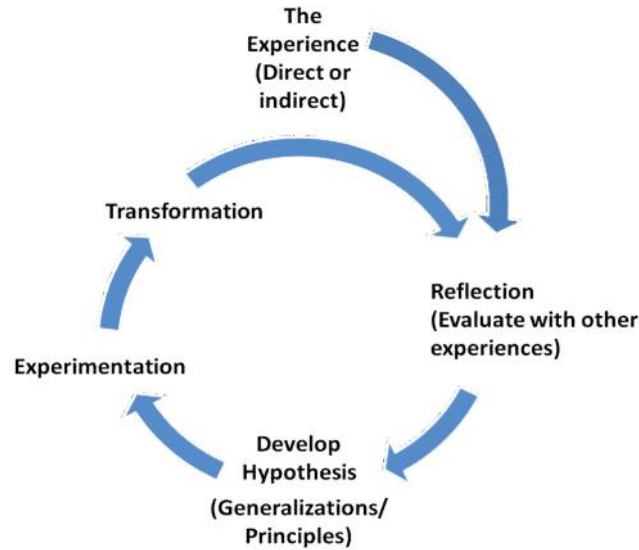


Figure 1: The Process of Reflection

Reflective Journal

“You don’t know what you know till you have written it down.” In order to be a lifelong learner, it is advisable to maintain a Reflective Journal that records your experiences and converts them into principles and teachable points of view. You and the organization you belong to are the greatest beneficiaries.

A reflective journal is not a personal diary. A diary merely records events and the writer’s comments or reactions. At times there may be the occasional insight or random thoughts. It is a scientific and scholarly approach to lifelong learning. I am a great believer in structured forms of learning wherein thoughts and ideas are being documented and critically analyzed.

Although there are suggested structures for a journal, it can be shaped to suit your style and convenience. The journal can be online as well although a handwritten copy is handy and likely to stimulate greater reflection. But this is purely a personal choice.

How Can Schools Develop Critical Thinking

Training for reflective thinking through critical thinking must start in classrooms. Libraries have been written on critical thinking in schools. There are 27 million Google hits on ‘*Creative thinking in Schools.*’ but unfortunately schools do not encourage this form of thinking. Teachers lay undue stress on standardized testing and on acquiring factual knowledge, thereby denying opportunities for analysis, synthesis and critique. The following will help in developing critical thinking in school:

- As long as learning in schools is teacher-centric, critical thinking will never get rooted. A key reform that schools must push through is **student-centric learning** wherein students are primarily responsible for their learning. They are their own teachers. This is also the foundation of lifelong learning.
- **Experiential learning** is an excellent methodology that invariably promotes critical thinking. While the entire syllabus cannot be taught experientially, certain key subjects can especially through group and personal projects. Teachers must define them as early as possible.
- **Wikipedization** of lesson plans for every topic that is being taught giving the background and sharing different perspectives.
- Teachers must teach relevant **concepts** before the start of every topic.
- Get children into the habit of **trans-disciplinary reading and research**.
- Teaching **concepts and abstract ideas** first, and thereafter discussing their relevance in today's and tomorrow's context. Let me illustrate this with an example – the idea of government for six year old students of grade one. These children should be taught to appreciate that when people live and work together they need clear rules and regulations to ensure order. An example of homes and classrooms can be given. Students should be asked to list out the rules that their families have at home, and why these rules are necessary. Likewise, classrooms too must have rules or else there would be chaos and learning would never happen. Thereafter, they should be asked what rules there should be in society and who should be responsible to ensure they are followed.

Critical Thinking in Schools

1. Student-centric learning.
2. Wikipedization of lesson plans.
3. Teach relevant concepts before the start of every topic.
4. Experiential learning – application of classroom teaching in real-life situations.
5. Encouraging trans-disciplinary reading and research.
6. Promote questioning in classrooms.
7. Teach goal-setting and reflection.
8. Change emphasis from problem-solving to problem-finding.

- Assist students in **real-life application** of whatever they are learning.
- **Questioning** must be encouraged in classrooms. In turn teachers should ask questions where there is a wait time of at least five seconds. For example, instead of asking what is the capital of India, the teacher could ask the following questions and allow a discussion: *What qualifies a city to be a capital? Does a country need to have a capital? Can a country have more than one capital?*
- Science and mathematics aim at solving problems and over time students become adept in the problem-solving processes. To arouse critical thinking teachers should change the emphasis from problem-solving to **problem-finding**. School projects should aim at identifying problems and framing problems before recommending alternative solutions.

Conclusion

Reflection requires solitude. One does not have to be *sadhu* or a monk to practice solitude. Everyone is capable of being alone with oneself. Even walking alone with one's thoughts, reading and reflecting on an absorbing book, or watching a beautiful sunset bestows solitude. At an organizational level, leadership retreats are greatly beneficial. They help the leadership team to:

- Conduct a free and frank SWOT analysis of the organization.
- Take stock of what progress has been made and what more needs to be done.
- Redefine the core values of the organization and have a better understanding.
- Discuss goals and plans for their implementation.
- Brainstorm solutions to solve problems and come forth with creative ideas.

Leadership cannot be learnt through books and lectures because it is experiential. And experiences are of value only if structured reflection is done. Setting aside quality time for reflection will always be a challenge and there are no straight answers.