

WHAT? Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

(Gibbs)



Experiential Learning

At its heart, learning by reflecting on experiences is a process of experiential learning, **learning by doing**. A **concrete experience** prompts **reflection**, incorporates **theoretical and practical considerations** leading to **another concrete experience** for future similar experiences or filling gaps in knowledge or skills.

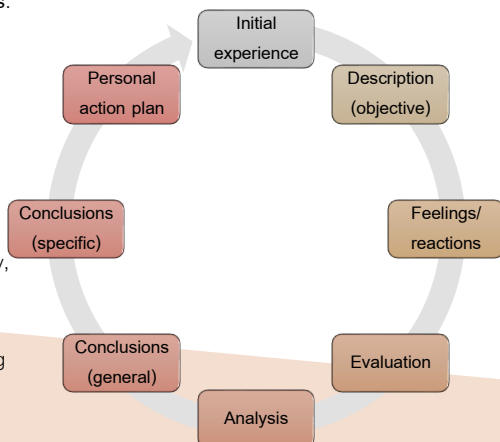
Gibbs suggested that there are three common pitfalls when debriefing after a concrete experience:

- The initial description of the events is relatively **superficial** as the learner (and sometimes the educator) **rushes to a conclusion and action plan**. There is essentially no analysis or reflection.
- The **emotional response is very strong** so the learner does not get past describing the events from a subjective viewpoint.
- The **emotional response is not acknowledged** and instead the learner repeatedly returns to it during the analysis and conclusion.

Structured Debriefing

In order to avoid these pitfalls, Gibbs described a well-known cycle of stages to progress through, to help ensure that the experience is fully explored. First, **what was said/done or the learning content** is explored **objectively**, this leads to a **subjective** exploration of the **impact of the actions or learning on the learner**. The **evaluation** is a **value driven discussion** of what went well and what went wrong to encourage the learner to focus on both the **positives and the negatives**.

After this the learner is guided to **make sense of the situation**; to form links between **cause and effect**, consider past **experiences**, personal **values** and **theoretical models** to help this process of meaning making. The next two steps are a narrowing process, from **general conclusions** that anyone might make from the evaluation and analysis conducted, to **conclusions that are specific to the learner and their context**. Finally, an **action plan** of specifically what the learner might change another time, or keep the same, or if they have identified learning needs, how and when are they going to meet them. As it is a cycle, it might be expected that the action plan will lead to **another experience**.



Reflecting on Reflection

Understanding models of reflection can help an educator seeking to guide a learner through useful reflective processes, they are also **useful for learners to understand because this can facilitate an explicit reflective process**. A learner may feel uncomfortable discussing emotional responses as part of their reflection or may tend toward heavy evaluation with minimal analysis or any other variant on the process. This could be due to **natural preferences** or **learner comfort**. If an educator takes time to draw out a learner's **insights into their personal, natural approach to reflection**, they can support the learner to improved reflection and self-regulation moving forwards. This could support **self-directedness for continuous, lifelong learning** by the learner.

SO WHAT?

Reflection may have become a 'buzz word' that can frustrate some individuals, however, it remains a **core part of adult learning** especially in the **experiential context of medical education**. Therefore, it deserves some explicit focus from both educators and learners. The ability to reflect in a way that considers **objective and subjective perspectives**, accounts for **viewpoints of different people**, with **theoretical and practical factors** explored is essential for **effective lifelong learning**.

Even an apparently competent clinician may not be an effective reflector and this may not become apparent until a big problem arises. So **addressing the cognitive skill of reflection while the stakes are lower** can support any learner through more challenging learning events.

NOW WHAT?

- ? When you debriefing a learner, have you observed a superficial description with a rush to a conclusion? How did you attempt to encourage more in-depth reflection?
- ? How have you dealt with guiding reflection for learners when there is a strong emotional response?
- ? Which of the stages of Gibbs reflective cycle are most comfortable for you? Which are the least comfortable? Why do you think this is?
- ? What open, generic questions might you ask at each stage of the reflective cycle to prompt the learner to expand their thinking?
- ? If you were to decide to model this reflective process, what example might you use and how would you demonstrate thinking at each stage?
- ? What are the limitations of this cycle of reflection? When might it not be useful? Are there steps that you might want to add/remove/expand to make it specific to the medical education context?

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

References and further reading

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- Johns, C. (2009). *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
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Key Words and Phrases

Experiential learning	Objective perspective
Subjective perspective	Emotional reaction
Evaluation	Analysis
Conclusions	Action plan
Self-directedness	Insight
Continuous learning	Cognitive skill

How to use this card

These training cards are designed to support educator development through individual reading and reflection or through group discussion.

The What? So What? Now What? format encourages the reader to take the knowledge presented on the card and consider why the topic matters within their context for all stakeholders in medical education from the learner to the educator, from colleagues to patients, in the present and the future. The reflective questions extend this thinking to take it forwards into their own context and their personal educational practice.

The questions are a starting point for constructive critical thinking that can be tackled through personal reflection or through group discussion at educational meetings and workshops.

