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## **Abstract**

This study explores the use of reflection by library and information staff to support practice and continuing development. A questionnaire was sent to library and information mailing lists. 424 responses were received, though the response rate varied for each question. 92%, of 423 respondents identified themselves as reflective practitioners, and 52%, of 363 respondents engaged in reflective writing. A number of benefits and barriers were identified. It is concluded that reflective practice and reflective writing are valuable tools for library and information staff, particularly for professional development. Employers and professional bodies have a role in facilitating reflective practice.

Key words: reflective practice, reflective writing, reflection, continuing professional development, CPD.

## **Introduction**

Reflection involves stepping back to consider what you are doing and why. It can occur before, during or after action (Bengtsson, 1995). Reflective practice occurs when the outcome of the reflection informs future activities (Moon, 2007). It is associated with educational experiences and with continuing professional development (CPD) (Black and Plowright, 2010). Reflective writing is one method of documenting reflections.

Reflective practice enables professionals: to develop specialist knowledge through experience; to be aware of the values which inform practice; to be able to deal with complex situations; and to demonstrate accountability (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). The danger of not reflecting on practice is that professionals operate routinely and unquestioningly, avoiding areas of complexity and failing to make informed decisions (Schön, 1995). Consequently, many professional bodies, for example, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) (2012), recommend reflective practice.

Within the library and information sector, staff work with many conflicting demands in a rapidly changing context. Reflective practice may help staff to deliver an effective and accountable service, which is responsive to complexity. CILIP highlights reflective practice as a method of CPD and offers a framework of professional awards, for which reflective writing provides key evidence of competence.

This paper considers to what extent reflection is utilised by staff in the library and information sector to support everyday practice and continuing development, explores how reflection is used, and considers the perceived benefits of, and barriers to, reflective practice.

The aim of the study was to explore the use of reflection by library and information staff to support their everyday practice and continuing development.

This aim was supported by the following objectives:

- To ascertain if library and information staff use reflection.

- To identify and explore the ways that reflection is used in the library and information sector.
- To explore the value of reflection as a professional tool for library and information staff.
- To identify and explore the benefits and rationale for using reflection in the library and information sector.
- To identify and explore the barriers to using reflection in the library and information sector.
- To make recommendations for best practice within the library and information sector.

## **Literature Review**

### **Reflection**

Several writers have noted a lack of clarity in the use of the term 'reflection' (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009; Moon, 2007). Black and Plowright (2010: 246) give a useful definition:

“Reflection is the process of engaging with learning and/or professional practice that provides an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate that learning or practice. The purpose is to develop professional knowledge, understanding and practice that incorporates a deeper form of learning which is transformational in nature and is empowering, enlightening and ultimately emancipatory”.

Reflection occurs during action, separate from action or as an action in itself (Bengtsson, 1995). A conscious or unconscious process (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009), it is a way of learning from experiences by creating fresh knowledge for future use (Watson, 2010). Reflection creates a distance between the self and the action taken, in order to view the self with greater clarity (Bengtsson, 1995).

Reflection is prompted by particular events (Ruth-Sahd, 2003), which are felt to be failures or successes (Ghaye, 2005). Reflection can relate to day-to-day events (micro-reflection) or to longer periods of time (macro-reflection) (Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan, 1997). It can be done at an individual, group or organisational level (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009; Ghaye, 2005).

Schön (1995) proposes that professionals reflect during practice ('reflection-in-action'), and after action ('reflection-on-action') as they deal with complex and unique situations to which they apply specialist knowledge. Wilson (2008) argues that 'reflection-on-the-future' is essential to improve practice.

Reflection involves the questioning of beliefs and attitudes (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009). Beliefs and assumptions determine how people interpret different situations and the examination of these can lead to consideration of alternative interpretations and responses (Larrivee, 2000). The process of reflection can lead to the

achievement of insight (Schön, 1995); enlightenment, (Bengtsson, 1995); and liberation (Larrivee 2000).

### **Reflective practice**

Reflective practice is the use of reflection to improve future practice (Moon, 2007). It involves evaluation of experiences (CILIP, 2012). Reflection is linked with practice development and can be used with a problem-solving approach to uncover unconscious ways of acting, allowing the exploration of different interpretations and responses (Larrivee, 2000). Reflection is aligned to evidence based practice (Booth, 2010) and with professional competence (Bengtsson, 1995). Reflection is linked to learning from mistakes, successes and 'adequate' experiences (Ghaye, 2005).

Professionals can use reflection to: assess their own practice and competence (Bengtson, 1995); demonstrate their participation in CPD (Watson, 2010); link theory with practice (Ruth-Sahd, 2003); promote learning and make better decisions (Rigano and Edwards, 1998); explore their values (Gardner, 2009); keep up to date with changing technology (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009); and improve individual and group performance (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009).

### **Reflective writing**

The most common method of reflection represented in the literature is reflective writing, often in the form of a journal, which can be completed any time, regularly or irregularly. It can be paper or electronic, comprising entries of varying lengths. It can be used to record reflections following a training course or a personal interaction or to explore a critical incident.

Reflective writing should involve some analysis and evaluation of events, including the perspectives of others. It should also include lessons learned and plans for future action based on the reflection (Watson, 2010). Moon (2007) outlines different levels of reflective writing, from superficial, descriptive accounts to deeply analytical accounts, which include emotional responses, and a recognition that things could be done differently. Deeper reflection leads to better outcomes, such as self-development and personal empowerment (Sen, 2010).

Reflective writing is used to assess and monitor the competency of professionals (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009); to improve and extend practice (Edwards et al, 2009); to analyse business practices (Martin, 2003); to explore individual and team performances (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); for self-assessment (Shepherd, 2006); to assess students (Sen, 2010; Roberts, 2009; Moon, 2007); as part of a professional portfolio (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009) and in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008; McCormack, 2001). Reflective writing is a skill which needs time to develop, and repeated practice, to become a habit (Sen, 2010).

### **Other methods of reflection**

Other methods described in the literature include personal accounts of drawing (Tokolahi, 2010); reflective conversations (Simpson and Trezise, 2011); conversation communities (McCormack and Kennelly, 2011); student peer support groups (Bold, 2008); shared reflective blogs (Boulton and Hramiak, 2012); workshops (Gardner, 2009); team coaching sessions (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); workplace group exercises (Langer, 2001); and 'dialog cafés' (Thunberg, 2011). Drawings and photographs provide a dynamic and flexible medium to express complex situations, allowing new insights to emerge (Tokolahi, 2010; Shepherd, 2006).

### **The benefits of reflective practice**

Individuals, teams and organisations can experience the benefits of reflective practice. For individuals, reflective practice can lead to increased self-awareness (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); increased self-esteem (Langer, 2009); increased happiness (Rosenberg, 2010); clarification of thoughts and ideas (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); increased understanding (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); and new insights (Larrivee, 2000). Reflective practice can enable the individual to: learn from experience (Moon, 2007); assess their own competence (Bengtsson, 1995); take stock (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); identify problems (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); decide on the next step (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); find solutions (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); make positive changes (Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan, 1997) and teach others (Bengtsson, 1995). Through reflection professionals can reveal their values (Tokolahi, 2010) and source of their motivation (McCormack, 2001). Reflective practice can enhance professional development and provides an important link between theory and practice (Ruth-Sahd, 2003). It can lead to personal empowerment (Gardner, 2009) and emancipation (Ruth-Sahd, 2003).

The benefits of reflective practice for teams and organisations include effective (Day, 2000) and transformational leadership (Rosenberg, 2010); the development of a learning culture (Langer, 2001); better teamwork (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); the development of innovations (Martin, 2003); increased quality of service and fewer complaints (Langer, 2001); more flexible and responsive staff (Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan, 1997); improved responses to critical situations (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); and increased employee motivation (Langer, 2001). Library organisations can benefit from the employment of reflective managers, who have greater awareness of self and the complexities of the work context (Sen, 2010).

### **The benefits of reflective writing**

Reflective writing is described in the literature in terms of benefits to individuals, though it may also benefit the service they provide. Reflective writing acknowledges and assists personal development (Langer, 2009). It enables individuals to identify personal strengths (Roberts, 2009); explore beliefs and attitudes (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009); identify areas for development and training needs (Edwards et al, 2009); and steps to improve practice (Langer, 2009).

Written reflections provide a record of progress and achievements (Roberts, 2009). Individuals can record and reflect on critical incidents (Larrivee, 2000); identify issues affecting practice (Larrivee, 2000); identify barriers experienced at the interpersonal and political level (Shepherd, 2006); offload stress (Larrivee, 2000); express thoughts and ideas (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); acknowledge feelings (Moon, 2007); explore unresolved conflicts (McCormack, 2001); and explore successes and mistakes (Langer, 2009).

Writing can increase awareness of situations and experiences (Sen, 2010), enabling the exploration of different perspectives (Moon, 2007). It can help individuals to see the link between past, present and future (Sen, 2010) and to develop connections between external events and internal processes (Hubbs and Brand, 2005). Looking back over journal entries can reveal repeated patterns (Larrivee, 2000) and lead to deeper reflection (Black and Plowright, 2010).

Reflective writing can support decision-making (Sen, 2010); increase skills (Edwards et al, 2009); increase confidence (Langer, 2009); increase positive feelings about work (Langer, 2009); and lead to improved practice (Rigano and Edwards, 1998).

#### **The benefits of other reflective methods**

Group reflections result in staff seeing things from a different perspective and an increased awareness of their ability to bring about change collaboratively (Gardner, 2009); increased co-operation and agreement (Langer, 2001); shared understandings and increased team cohesion (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009); increased staff motivation and a sense of involvement in management decisions (Thunberg, 2011). Reflective drawing led Tokolahi, (2010) to deeper insights and a reduction in stress.

#### **The barriers to reflective practice and reflective writing**

Barriers can be personal, for example a lack of aptitude towards reflection (Roberts, 2009). Other barriers include: lack of motivation, possibly caused by failing to see the value of reflection (Roberts, 2009); the power relationship between student and assessor (Ruth-Sahd, 2003); the prevailing culture (Ghaye, 2005); lack of time (Otienoh, 2009); unfamiliarity with techniques and lack of confidence (Sanders and McKeown, 2007); sharing of personal and sometimes painful emotions for assessed work (Ghaye, 2007); and issues of confidentiality (Mackintosh, 1998).

#### **Recommendations to facilitate reflective practice**

Individuals should be supported in order to foster reflective practice (Sen, 2010). Networks, communities of practice and reflective partnerships can increase the effectiveness of reflection (Koufogiannakis, 2010; Edwards et al, 2009).

Guidance is important for reflective writing (Moon, 2007). In the classroom, tutors must be able to teach the value of reflection (Ruth-Sahd, 2003). This increases its effectiveness (George, 2002).

The organisational culture should be supportive of reflective practice (Nikolou-Walker, 2007). Networks should be established within and between organisations to ensure that learning is supported and shared (Day, 1993). Workplace cultures can enhance the reflective process by being open to the learning process, and refraining from apportioning blame, should admissions of failure occur (Ghaye, 2005).

### **Reflective practice in the library and information sector**

CILIP (2012) recommend the use of reflection for CPD. Reflective writing forms key evidence when applying for CILIP qualifications (Watson, 2010). A systematic review of the literature on reflective practice in the library and information sector (Grant, 2007) found few published accounts and concluded that the extent to which library and information science (LIS) professionals utilised reflection was unknown. The review concludes:

“Further research is recommended to investigating the, as yet, unknown proportion of the profession which engages in some form of reflection; how reflective activity has changed or influenced current or future practice; and whether reflection leads to measurable service improvements?” (Grant, 2007:164)

Perryman (2008:55), in a critique of the above review concurred that “...a study of the use of reflective practice in LIS would be beneficial to the profession...”

Reflection has been incorporated into the educational content of Higher Education (HE) LIS courses in recent years. It has been related to action learning (Sanders and McKeown 2007); preparation for the workplace and professional development (Sen, 2010; Hallam and McAllister, 2008). Outcomes include: increased awareness of situations and experiences (Sen, 2010) and increased confidence in working in a digital environment (Hallam and McAllister, 2008).

Reflection is linked to evidence-based library and information practice. The acquisition of reflective practice skills is essential for evidence-based information professionals (Hallam and Partridge, 2006). Further studies focus on information literacy (IL) and the role of reflection. Reflection and reflective writing can be used to assess IL skills and leads to deeper learning (McKinney and Sen, 2012) and increased ability to transfer skills to a wider context (Bruce 2004). Reflection is also essential for teachers of IL (Whitworth, 2012) and for LIS professionals to help clients search for and use information (Hughes, Bruce and Edwards, 2006).

Library and information staff reflections are evident in online blogging. An online LIS professional development tool, cpd23, invites participants to complete practical tasks, using a combination of Web 2.0 applications and traditional methods, and to reflect on them via a blog (Birkwood, 2011). Blogs are said to be the “...perfect tool for communicating the evaluating part of the reflective practice process. Blogs are a great way to share your thoughts.” (wigglesweets, 2012).

Writing an individual blog can be a useful tool for reflection, and allows collaboration and discussion within a virtual community (Rooney-Browne and Alcock, 2009). The immediacy of online debates, conducted via library blogs, makes them more useful than published codes and scholarly literature in addressing contemporary ethical issues arising from practice (Powers, 2008) .

### **Summary of the literature**

Reflection is a professional skill which can enhance practice and contribute to learning and CPD. Reflective writing is the most common method of reflection represented in the literature and can be used to gain personal insights, to demonstrate competency, to assess students and in the research process. Other methods of reflection include reflective conversations, group work and drawing. Barriers to reflection include lack of motivation, adverse organisational culture, lack of time, poor writing skills and personality type. The provision of support and guidance is important to facilitate reflective practice. In the library and information sector, reflection has been linked to professional education and development, evidence based practice and IL. This study attempts to ascertain the extent to which LIS professionals use reflection, which is currently unknown.

### **Research Methods**

Library and Information staff were surveyed to establish the extent to which reflection is used and to explore the benefits of, and barriers to, reflective practice. **See Appendix 1.** Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered. Ethical approval was received from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics policy. The surveys were completed anonymously.

#### **The survey**

A focus group assisted in the questionnaire design. The research tool was pre-tested by a group of Librarianship students at the University of Sheffield, most of whom had experience of working in the library and information sector. A number of minor alterations were made to the questionnaire as a result.

**Comment [B1]:** Is the survey instrument appended?

#### **The sample**

A purposive sample was drawn from a number of library and information professionals subscribing to JISCMAIL<sup>1</sup>. Respondents included chartered library and information professionals; teachers of IL; healthcare librarians; public libraries; library and information professionals concerned with children's services; and research support librarians.

The survey was took place during December 2012. Four hundred and twenty-four responses were obtained.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Academic Mailing List Service



### Data analysis methods

Excel was used to aid data analysis and data visualisation. Significance testing was carried out to determine if there was a significant link between reflective practice and training; and reflective writing and training. Since the data collected was nominal, the Chi squared test ( $\chi^2$ ) was selected to test for significance. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### Results

The results are presented in two sections (1) the quantitative data using descriptive and inferential statistics; (2) thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

#### Quantitative data

Four hundred and twenty-four people responded to the survey. The response rates to each individual question varied, partly because some respondents chose not to answer some questions and partly because the survey design directed respondents to different sections as a result of their responses. The response rate for each question is indicated for clarity.

#### Demographics

The highest number of respondents to the survey, 168 (49%), was from the HE sector. Other sectors responded as follows: Public: 61(18%); Health: 40(12%); FE: 35(10%); Schools: 14(4%); Charity: 5(1.5%); Independent/Private: 5(1.5%); Government: 5(1.5%); Legal: 4(1.2%); Commercial: 2(0.6%); Scientific: 2(0.6%); Financial: 1(0.3%). Survey respondents had been employed in the library and information sector for varying periods. Less than 5 years: 43(12%); 5-10 years: 86(25%); 11-15 years: 60(17%); 16-20 years: 53(15%); 21-25 years: 40(12%); more than 25 years: 64(18.5%).

#### Reflective practice

Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be reflective practitioners. Of 423 respondents, 389 (92 %) identified themselves as reflective practitioners, including those who answered 'sometimes'. When asked if they consciously spent time reflecting on their professional practice, of 423 responses, 384 (91%) answered either 'yes' or 'sometimes'. When asked if they consciously determined how the outcome of their reflection would affect their current or future practice, of 421 responses, 352 (84%) answered either 'yes' or 'sometimes'.

When asked to identify the benefits of reflective practice, survey respondents were asked to select all that applied from a list of 28 benefits (Table 1). Of 359 responses, the 3 most commonly cited benefits were: 'learning from significant incidents', selected by 316 respondents (88%); 'CPD', selected by 304 respondents (85%); and 'identification of gaps in skills and knowledge', selected by 290 respondents (81%).

Comment [B2]: We need to know where we can see a list of these

Respondents were asked to select all that applied from a list of 14 barriers to reflective practice (Table 2). Of 350 responses, the most commonly cited barriers were: 'lack of time' (89%), selected by 311 respondents; 'lack of motivation', selected by 160

Comment [B3]: We have to check all this out

respondents (46%); and 'not supported by organisational culture', selected by 139 (40%).

Out of 361 respondents, 141 respondents (39%) had received training in reflective practice and 220 respondents (61%) had not (Figure 1).

### **Reflective writing**

Out of 363 respondents, 190 respondents (52%) engaged in reflective writing and 173 respondents (48%) did not. Of the 190 respondents who did reflective writing, the least popular format was paper only, used by 22 respondents (11.6%). An electronic format was used by 83 respondents (43.7%) and 85 respondents (44.7%) used both paper and electronic formats. Out of 191 respondents who did reflective writing, 105(55%) kept their writing private, 88(46%) shared it with specific individuals and 46(24%) made it public. Of 189 people, 138 (73%) did reflective writing for their own purposes; 61 (32%) for a CILIP qualification; 58 (31%) for their workplace and 29 (15%) for study purposes. The 3 most common benefits of reflective writing, identified from a list of 28 benefits, were: 'CPD', selected by 219 respondents (73%); 'learning from significant incidents', selected by 217 respondents (72%); and 'identification of gaps in skills and knowledge', selected by 200 respondents (66%) (Table 1).

Benefits	Reflective practice		Reflective writing	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Continuing Professional Development	304	85%	219	73%
Learning from significant incidents	316	88%	217	72%
Learning from training or educational opportunities	275	77%	187	62%
Identification of gaps in skills and knowledge	290	81%	200	66%
Identification of personal strengths and weaknesses	284	79%	184	61%
Identification of goals	205	57%	165	55%
Increasing knowledge	195	54%	130	43%
Increasing understanding	262	73%	188	62.5%
Linking theory and practice	204	57%	171	57%
Improving planning of future actions	259	72%	193	64%
Improving professional judgements	209	58%	155	51.5%
Improving critical thinking	212	59%	177	59%
Solving dilemmas	209	58%	143	47.5%
Achieving perspective	196	55%	172	57%
Achieving clarity	170	47%	166	55%
Expression of emotions	70	19.5%	82	27%
Stress management	120	33%	84	28%
Understanding the perspective of others	211	59%	121	40%
Improving working relationships	197	55%	107	35.5%
Improving professional practice	261	73%	180	60%
Identification of need to change	223	62%	141	47%
Catalyst for change	144	40%	105	35%
Personal empowerment	129	36%	103	34%
Emancipation	47	13%	36	12%
Self-development	229	64%	154	51%
Appreciation of achievements	145	40%	119	39.5%
Sharing experiences with others	185	51.5%	133	44%
Demonstrating professional practice to others	151	42%	126	42%

Table 1. Responses to Q4: Do you consider any of the following to be benefits of engaging in reflective practice? (n=359) & Q12: Do you consider any of the following to be benefits of engaging in reflective writing? (n=301).

The three most common barriers to reflective writing were: 'lack of time', selected by 292 respondents (91.5%); 'lack of motivation', selected by 154 respondents (48%); and 'not supported by organisational culture', selected by 103 respondents (32%).

Barriers	Reflective practice		Reflective writing	
	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Lack of time</b>	311	89%	292	91.5%
<b>Lack of knowledge</b>	79	23%	72	23%
<b>Lack of guidance</b>	122	35%	93	29%
<b>Lack of training</b>	87	25%	97	30%
<b>Lack of skill</b>	81	23%	76	24%
<b>Lack of experience</b>	89	25%	87	27%
<b>Lack of motivation</b>	160	46%	154	48%
<b>Concerns about confidentiality</b>	58	17%	70	22%
<b>No perceived benefits of reflection</b>	52	15%	34	11%
<b>Negative impact on self-esteem</b>	42	12%	30	9%
<b>Unwillingness to focus on emotions</b>	48	14%	34	11%
<b>Unwillingness to admit mistakes</b>	83	24%	50	16%
<b>Fear of repercussions</b>	68	19%	45	14%
<b>Not supported by organisational culture</b>	139	40%	103	32%

Table 2. Responses to Q5: Do you consider any of the following to be barriers to engaging in reflective practice? (n=350) & Q13: Do you consider any of the following to be barriers to engaging in reflective writing? (n=319).

Out of 339 responses, the majority of respondents, 241 (71%), had not received training in reflective writing (Figure 1).

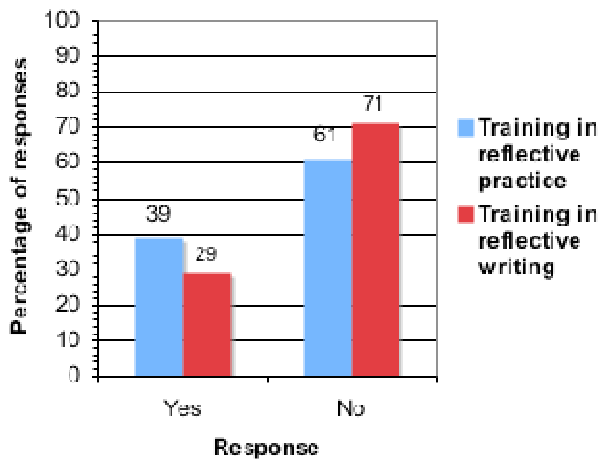


Figure 1. Responses to Q6: Have you ever had any training in reflective practice? (n=361) & Q14: Have you ever had any training in reflective writing? (n=339).

## Significance testing

Significance testing was carried out with regards to the link between training and reflective practice and training and reflective writing. The number of survey respondents who had received training in reflective practice was 141. Of these, 136 (96%) answered 'yes' or 'sometimes' to question 1: 'Do you consider yourself to be a reflective practitioner?' and 5 (3.5%) answered "no". Two hundred and twenty respondents had not had training in reflective practice. Of these, 204 (93%) answered 'yes' or 'sometimes' to question 1, and 16 (7%) answered 'no'. Using the Chi squared test, the relationship between training and reflective practice was not found to be significant ( $p > 0.1$ ).

The number of survey respondents who had received training in reflective writing was 98. Of these, 82 (84%) answered 'yes' to question 8: 'Do you engage in reflective writing?' and 16 (16%) answered 'no'. Two hundred and forty-one respondents had not had training in reflective writing. Of these, 96 (40%) answered 'yes' to question 8 and 145 (60%) answered 'no'. Using the Chi squared test the relationship between receiving training in reflective writing and engaging in reflective writing was found to be significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Comment [B4]:

Comment [B5R4]: As above

Comment [B6]:

## Summary

Most respondents considered themselves to be reflective practitioners. Just over half engaged in reflective writing. The most commonly cited benefits of reflective practice and reflective writing were 'learning from significant incidents', 'CPD' and 'identification of gaps in skills and knowledge'. The most commonly cited barriers to reflective practice and reflective writing were 'lack of time', 'lack of motivation' and 'not supported by organisational culture'. The relationship between receiving training in reflective writing and engaging in reflective writing was found to be significant.

## Thematic analysis of qualitative data

The themes which emerged from the qualitative analysis were: use of the terms relating to reflection; personality; value of reflective practice; benefits of, and barriers to, reflective practice and reflective writing; organisational culture; training and education; skills; methods; and recommendations.

## Use of the terms relating to reflection

The use of terms such as 'reflection', 'reflective practice' and 'reflective writing' triggered a response in several respondents. Some viewed the terms neutrally, whilst others had a negative reaction to them. There were varying levels of awareness of the terms.

For some, the terms were seen as jargon, which some respondents viewed neutrally:

"Seems a new term for an old practice."

Others had a negative reaction to the terms:

"Even hearing the terms sends a shiver down my back..."

Reflective practice was difficult to define, which could be problematic:

"I think RP means so many different things to different people."

Although using too strict a definition could be a barrier:

“I find the idea that reflection has to be done in a specific way for it to ‘count’ to be really irritating and a barrier”

One could be a reflective practitioner without being aware of it as a specific term:

“Some people may engage in RP but not consciously - I think many people would say that they ‘learn from their mistakes’ but wouldn’t necessarily call this reflective practice.”

‘Reflective writing’ was a new term for a few respondents and some had little knowledge of reflective practice:

“I’ve never done it or heard of it before so can’t comment on the benefits.”

### **Personality and reflective practice**

Some made the connection between personality and the ability to reflect:

“The ability to think reflexively is largely dependent on the possession of certain personality characteristics – so it is something that is very difficult [*sic*] for those who lack such features to pick up or develop.”

Many people referred to reflection as ‘instinctive’ or ‘natural’ and others found it hard:

“It is the conscious processing of what we all do naturally anyway...”

“I find it difficult to be reflective and it is not something I enjoy.”

Personality could determine the right reflective style:

“I think it has the potential to help many of us but each person has to find one style that suits them!”

### **The value of reflective practice**

Several described reflection as central to their practice, using the term ‘key’:

“...reflection (as part of evaluation) is key for most activities to actually prove valuable and lead to improvements in the future.”

Related terms used were “necessary”, “vital” and “essential.”

Other comments related to the worth of reflection:

“...The time taken away from the ‘day job’ is invaluable in making sense of things.”

One comment referred to the power of reflective practice:

“Reflecting on issues one has dealt with is a much more potent tool than any third-party training initiative.”

However, the centrality of reflection as a professional tool presented a difficulty for some:

“...can be very tedious, especially after completing Chartership portfolio where reflective writing was key.”

### **Benefits of reflective practice and reflective writing**

Benefits were noted at the individual, team and organisational level. Individual benefits included: gaining perspective; exploration of role and position; highlighting and accepting the barriers to change; analysis of situations and procedures; checking the progress of work assignments and assisting with course and job applications. Team benefits included: modelling good practice; coaching and mentoring and education of others. Organisational benefits included improvement of services; highlighting good

practice; facilitating innovative practice; development of plans and policies; and promotion of service (See Table 3).

**Table 3. Benefits of reflective practice and writing evidenced from the data**

Benefits	Evidence from the quotes
Individual	<p>“Good way of assessing things - to stand back from it all and analyse in a thinking and emotional way.”</p> <p>“Appreciating the constraints of change, the limitations of professional roles, the role of departmental politics, the awareness of one [sic] position and its limitations...”</p> <p>“Production of a record showing progress in reflective writing and the development of skills related to this... can then be used to illustrate said skills in Chartership, job interviews etc.”</p>
Team	<p>“By sharing, leading by example, and helping others to understand what reflective writing is.”</p> <p>“To increase other staff’s knowledge.”</p>
Organisation	<p>“Improving my services to students and staff.”</p> <p>“Reflection is a useful tool for identifying best practice and striving for excellence in professional activities.”</p> <p>“Policy creation requires specific analysis of problems, capabilities of the workforce, and identification of purposeful ways forward (around or to solve the problem).”</p> <p>“...can always be used to highlight the range of activities ongoing within your library service.”</p>

### **Barriers to reflective practice and reflective writing**

For some, demanding work schedules left little time for reflection:

“Conflict between what needs doing now, and time for reflection is difficult to manage.”

One respondent implied that without a requirement to reflect for a specific purpose, it was difficult to feel motivated:

“I appreciate the benefits of reflection, but I generally do not feel motivated to reflect unless I am directed to reflect for CPD or my appraisal.”

A few mentioned that being a lone professional was a barrier:

“Working as a sole librarian in a school - requires effort to maintain professional connections and experience.”

One respondent noted that reflection could lead to personal difficulties when problems could not be resolved:

“Can make you spiral if you can’t sort out an issue. Esp [*sic*] if it recurs week after week.”

Another found that the documentation and training associated with reflection was overly complicated and tedious:

“Needs to be really simple to be effective and most of the training and paperwork involved is too complex and boring.”

Reflective writing could lead to negative feelings:

“Reflection can be uncomfortable, personally and professionally...”

Reflective writing for professional awards was a barrier for one respondent in terms of the specific format required and the perceived lack of confidentiality:

“(I) find it somehow contrived when forced to put it in a standard presentation for Chartership or Revalidation. These CILIP activities are not confidential so writing is constrained and not fully reflective.”

The act of putting something into writing could feel risky for some:

“...once something is in writing, I would imagine that some people would be uncomfortable that it may be read by others, or used as proof against you...”

One person described a lack of discernment as a barrier to reflective writing:

“Lack of clarity at times in knowing precisely what the causal issue is that needs examination and resolution.”

For another, futility was a barrier to reflective writing for them:

“It’s a bit pointless, unless you can’t clarify thoughts without writing them down.”

### **Non-supportive organisational cultures**

Several commented that their workplace did not support reflection and some feared that their employers would disapprove of reflective practice:

“It is not discussed or encouraged professionally or within the organisation”

“Some employers see this as just inactivity and it is not encouraged.”

Reflective practice was sometimes encouraged only amongst certain staff grades and this could lead to conflicts:

“I think a barrier to formal reflective practice i.e. putting time a side [*sic*] to write is often not given to low level library staff and is only encouraged with those undertaking chartership, ACLIP or other formal qualifications.”

“...not everyone does or is able to do it in my organisation which causes issues when I’m making the effort but other people directly involved with my work aren’t!”

The admission of mistakes could be risky:

“especially in a period of continued staff cuts, it feels a risk to admit what hasn’t gone well.”

Even where reflection occurred it was difficult to change cultural practice:



“...there is always a pressure to conform to local cultures and behaviours that mean that reflective practice doesn’t always revolve into action.”

One respondent indicated that reflective practice itself could be utilised negatively by some organisations:

“So much of reflective practice has become how to communicate professionally which means in the politically correct language of the library and managementees [*sic*] so that all is positive, effective, while elephants in the corners roam lost and truth is never spoken!”

### **Supportive organisational cultures**

In contrast, some reported positively that reflective practice was integral to, or at least supported by, their workplace:

“I suppose the confidence to challenge our institutional norms was empowering... partly because my new ideas were welcomed and seen to improve our service.”

A number of people reported that reflection formed part of their annual appraisals or professional development planning, others incorporated reflections into regular meetings:

“My library requires us to complete a Professional Development Plan every few years in order to avail of training – I find the time to do it because it is necessary, but then I always find it a useful exercise once I start.”

“...I have monthly reviews with my manager where we reflect formally on tasks undertaken and to come.”

One respondent described a process of guided reflection undertaken by team members:

“As a team we use peer observation where the observer guides the reflection of the observed. This can be verbal or written reflection but usually both. The written allows for deeper reflection. The guide ensures that all stages of the reflective process are explored.”

Several commented on the fast pace and rapid rate of change in their workplaces.

Although this was identified as a barrier by one respondent, others saw reflective practice as a means to ensure effectiveness in such contexts:

“In this fast-paced technology-driven environment, I find it most helpful personally and professionally to reflect on changes in practice that could be (or have been) initiated and consider the implications for growth on a personal as well as professional level.”

### **Reflective practice training and education**

Many had been introduced to reflective practice and reflective writing whilst undertaking a course. These included undergraduate and postgraduate courses in teaching, education, management, and library and information science. Preparation for CILIP awards provided an introduction to, and for some, the impetus for, reflection:

“My main motivation for reflecting on my professional experiences has been my progression towards achieving chartered status.”

The CILIP mentorship system contributed to an increased perception of the value of reflection:

“As a CILIP mentor I have gained a better understanding of the importance of reflective practice in the last few years.”

For one respondent, participation in an on-line professional development course aimed at library and information staff had enabled them to establish reflection as part of their practice:

“...Also taking part in CPD23 has helped me to continue this practice which I feel is very worthwhile.”

Different views were stated about the importance of training:

“Essential to have training in order to make it constructive and effective.”

“A professional will reflect on their practice whether they have received ‘Training’ or not.”

### **Skills associated with reflective practice and reflective writing**

Several people commented on the skills needed for reflection, which some found difficult to acquire. It could also be difficult to ascertain whether one had acquired them adequately. One person commented that the skills involved in reflective writing needed practice:

“While reflective writing comes naturally for some, I felt that I had to work on my technique, style and method, which certainly differs from practitioner to practitioner.”

Others expressed uncertainty about their general skill level in reflection:

“How do you know that you are reflecting effectively on your practice rather than just going through the motions?”

### **Methods used to reflect**

Written reflection was used by many respondents and took the form of a diary or learning record, which may have been private or shared with others:

“I keep notes myself, either in Evernote or a paper journal. I try to keep a log of my achievements and feelings, and share them at the appropriate time e.g. a team meeting.”

Others published their reflections online:

“I find having a blog helps clarify thoughts.”

One advantage of this was that this resulted in helpful responses from others:

“Publishing it to a blog can result in useful comments.”

Many people discussed their reflections informally with colleagues and used networking as part of the reflective process:

“I also share ideas with colleagues and staff at other institutions which I find an excellent way of being reflective.”

### **Recommendations to facilitate reflective practice**

A few made suggestions for the promotion of reflective practice within the library and information profession. One commented on the need for formal training:

“I believe librarianship would benefit from training in reflective practice forming part of our professional qualifications etc (it wasn’t when I qualified, but maybe it is now).”

Further comments indicated that reflection should become a professional requirement in order to integrate it into regular practice:

“I do think it should be more built into our processes and there is no formal requirement to do this, when in fact it must raise standards and help us be better at our jobs.”

One person noted that management support would assist in the practice of reflection:

“I usually reflect on my performance as a matter of course. It would be useful if my organisation/senior management actively encouraged such development.”

### **Summary**

The main themes emerging from the qualitative data indicated: there are different reactions to the terms relating to reflection; the ability to reflect may be related to personality type; many find it a valuable practice; reflection can be beneficial to the individual and their service; barriers include lack of time and lone working; organisational culture can influence the extent to which reflective practice occurs; training can provide an effective introduction to reflective practice, as it is important to develop appropriate skills; methods of reflection used include diaries, blogs and discussions; management and professional support were ways to promote reflective practice.

### **Discussion**

#### **The use of reflection**

Responses to the survey, whilst indicating that it was widely used, revealed some contradictions which may show that some respondents have a limited understanding of reflective practice. The majority of respondents (92%) considered themselves to be reflective practitioners, but fewer (84%) said that they consciously determined how the outcome of their reflection would affect their current or future practice. Perhaps this difference is due to lack of agreement about the terms related to reflection, which is highlighted in the literature (Chapman, Dempsey and Warren-Forward, 2009; Moon, 2007). Some respondents reporting that reflection was difficult to define, or that the definition was either too specific or not specific enough. A few commented that they had not heard of reflective practice, though this does not rule out the possibility that they were reflective. A small minority (8%) did not identify themselves as reflective practitioners.

Although the majority of respondents considered they were reflective practitioners only about half engaged in reflective writing, one of the most widely represented methods in the literature (Sen, 2010; Moon, 2007). Of those that did write reflectively most used an electronic format, either as well as a paper record (45%), or instead of it (44%). Since Information Technology is central to the sector, it is unsurprising that staff within the library and information professions would use electronic records.

Just over half of the reflective writers (55%) kept their accounts private, contrasting with a quarter (24%) who made their writing public, and just under half (46%) who shared their reflective writing with specific individuals. Most respondents (73%) did reflective writing for their own purposes; a third (32%) did so for CILIP qualifications; and a similar number (31%) for their workplace. Written reflections were used in a number of ways including: writing reports; preparing for appraisals and job applications; recording the outcomes of training they had attended; checking progress of assignments; devising plans; educating others; and promoting services. Most of these examples of the use of reflective writing are concurrent with those identified in the literature relating to recording progress and achievements (Roberts, 2009); assisting personal development (Langer, 2009); enhancing learning (McKinney and Sen, 2012; Moon, 2007); and teaching others (Bengtsson, 1995). However, the use of reflective writing in the promotion of services was not explicitly found in the literature, which tended to focus on outcomes for the individual.

Respondents who published their reflections online reported that it was useful in clarifying thoughts, in reflecting on initiatives and in gaining helpful responses from others. This response concurs with Powers (2008), who highlighted the function of library blogs in conducting professional debates; and with Sanders and McKeown (2007), who found that virtual communities of practice were beneficial to personal and social reflection.

The other reflective method identified by respondents was discussion with colleagues. This was often done through electronic mail and sometimes with colleagues from other workplaces. Reflective conversations are recommended in the literature as potentially more useful than working alone (Simpson and Trezise, 2011). The use of electronic mail for discussion is more practical for lone professionals who may find it difficult to arrange face-to-face meetings with colleagues. Some respondents incorporated reflection into their appraisals or regular reporting mechanisms.

A few reported that their workplace encouraged reflection in an embedded way so that it formed part of team meetings, training and personal development. Where this genuinely occurred it was described in positive terms, for example:

“At my organisation we’re encouraged to write reflective reports on every training event we attend to feedback to colleagues in meetings...We also engage in reflective writing as part of our annual Personal Development Review (PDR) process...Having the culture of reflective practice embedded in our organisation helps enormously with both team and individual staff development.”

Evidence from the literature suggests that reflection can be particularly effective when it is an integral part of the organisation (Thunberg, 2011). This does not seem to have translated into practice for all organisations employing library and information staff, despite findings from studies which have shown that reflective practice can be beneficial for organisations (Sen, 2010).

### **The value of reflection as a professional tool**

One theme emerging from the qualitative data was the value of reflective practice. Certain positive terms were repeatedly used to describe reflective practice. These included 'key', 'vital', 'necessary', 'essential', 'valuable' and 'potent'. Those who had incorporated reflection into their work, and found it useful, emphasised how central it had become to their professional practice.

However, a number of respondents reported finding reflection 'difficult', 'boring', 'pointless' and 'uncomfortable'. This was linked to experiences of being guided to reflect in a way they found overly complicated or constraining and from reflecting alone, where issues could not be resolved and therefore no value was derived from the activity.

This division of opinion about the value of reflection could be related to experiences of it, which may have been either positive or negative. Negative experiences of reflective writing can lead to a lack of confidence and motivation (Otienoh, 2009). Alternatively it may be related to different personalities, as some find reflection easier to do than others (Roberts, 2009).

Despite the difficulties expressed by some, most respondents linked reflection to CPD and learning from significant incidents. Further comments relating reflection to professional practice included: improving the service provided; exploring roles; accepting limitations; highlighting good practice; facilitating innovation; leading and teaching others; and developing workplace policies. So reflection was being used to develop good practice within the workplace and found, by some, to be a valuable professional tool.

Given that reflection has the potential to enhance professional practice and yet is found to be difficult by some, it is necessary to consider ways in which people could be given appropriate training, guidance and support to facilitate reflective practice more widely. Several papers have recommended this (Sen, 2010; Roberts, 2009; Bold, 2008). It may be that those who find reflection difficult are unaware of different methods which can be used, such as drawing, or reflecting with others, which they may find more suitable for them.

### **The benefits of reflection**

The most frequently cited benefits to reflective practice and reflective writing were 'CPD', 'learning from significant incidents' and 'identification of gaps in skills and knowledge'. In addition, over seventy percent of respondents cited the following benefits to reflective practice: 'learning from training or educational opportunities'; 'identification of personal strengths and weaknesses'; 'increasing understanding'; 'improving planning of future actions'; and 'improving professional practice'. The same pattern emerged for the benefits of reflective writing. Respondents also mentioned the role of reflection in modelling good practice; improving services; mentoring; and educating others.

These benefits are concurrent with the literature in which benefits to the individual (Sanders and McKeown, 2007) and benefits to the team (Richards, Mascarenhas and Collins, 2009) or organisation (Sen, 2010) are outlined. Bengtsson (1995) also noted the role of reflective practice in teaching others.

### **Barriers to reflection**

The most frequently selected barrier to reflective practice and reflective writing was 'lack of time'. This was followed by 'lack of motivation' and 'lack of organisational support'. Several mentioned the demands experienced at work, often along with decreasing resources and rapid change, which did not leave much time for reflection. One stated:

“Sadly I find I don’t really have much time to do reflection anymore, what with staffing levels being reduced and workloads increasing.”

This could lead to frustration for some who were aware that their practice would benefit from reflection but found it impossible to fit in to busy schedules. Lack of time has been identified as a barrier to reflective writing in several papers (Otienoh, 2009; Martin, 2003).

One reason for low motivation is the lack of external requirement or direction to reflect, which was highlighted by one respondent. This is in contrast to another respondent who felt restrained by the format of reflection required for CILIP Chartership. Lack of external support to reflect was less of a barrier for others, who had found the benefits of reflection for themselves and pointed out that they reflected on practice, despite not being asked or encouraged to. Lack of external requirement to reflect may be linked to lack of motivation in people who do not see the benefits of reflection for themselves (Roberts, 2009). The requirement to reflect, whilst providing motivation for some, can have a negative effect if it is too prescriptive.

Lack of support for reflection from the organisational culture was a barrier which several commented on. Some noted that reflective practice was not encouraged in their organisation and others felt that it would be interpreted by their colleagues or employers as wasting time. Although some found reflective practice useful to facilitate learning from mistakes, others noted a reluctance to admit mistakes if the organisational culture tended to apportion blame, or where people felt their jobs were at risk. As one respondent commented:

“Some departments are rather a blame culture and don’t want to learn from mistakes.”

Even where reflective practice was supported within organisations it was sometimes limited to staff at a certain grade or to processes, such as appraisal, and so the full potential of reflection was not achieved. Also, instituting changes as a result of reflection was sometimes blocked by strong cultures of conformity, thereby decreasing the application of insights gained from the practice.

Organisational culture is recognised to be a potential barrier to reflective practice (Ghaye, 2005; Martin, 2003). This barrier could be addressed if employers understood the benefits of reflection for their individuals, teams and organisations.

Another barrier mentioned was that many library and information staff were lone professionals. This could be overcome if isolated professionals formed partnerships and networks to support each other in reflective practice. This was suggested by Koufogiannakis (2010) and demonstrated by Simpson and Trezise (2011).

Many felt that their personality type was not conducive to reflection. In contrast many others indicated that reflection was an instinctive and natural process for them. This seems to support the idea that reflection is easier for certain personality types, as noted by Roberts (2009).

A number of respondents to the survey had been introduced to reflective practice and reflective writing whilst undertaking a course or by attending a training session. Whilst some felt training to be essential and useful, others felt it was unnecessary and of limited benefit. This study found that the link between identifying oneself as a reflective practitioner and having received training in reflective practice was not significant. However a significant relationship was found between having received training in reflective writing and engaging in reflective writing.

### **Summary**

Reflective practice is used widely within the library and information sector, though the concept is not fully understood by all. Reflective writing and reflective discussions are the most commonly used methods. Many people value reflection as a professional tool and see it as key to their practice. Others find it problematic and may benefit from support, guidance and training. The relationship between training and reflective writing is significant.

One method of reflection does not suit everyone, some may benefit from reflecting individually, others in groups. Whilst writing is a popular method of reflecting, those who find it difficult may prefer other methods.

Reflective practice and reflective writing are beneficial to CPD, to enhance learning from significant incidents and to identify gaps in skills and knowledge. The benefits extend beyond the individual to their teams and employing organisations.

The main barriers to reflective practice and reflective writing are 'lack of time', 'lack of motivation' and 'lack of organisational support'.

### **Conclusions**

There were varying levels of awareness about reflective practice and different reactions to the terms relating to reflection. Written reflections were mostly recorded electronically, either as well as, or instead of, a paper record. Fifty-five percent of the respondents who did reflective writing kept their writing private; 46% shared it with

specific individuals; and 24% made it public. Seventy-three percent did reflective writing for their own purposes; 32% for a CILIP qualification; 31% for their workplace; and 15% as part of their studies.

Some respondents engaged in reflective discussions with colleagues. The main benefits of reflection were: 'learning from significant incidents'; 'CPD'; and 'identification of gaps in skills and knowledge'. Benefits were noted in relation to individuals, teams and organisations.

The main barriers to reflection were: 'lack of time'; 'lack of motivation'; and 'not supported by organisational culture'. Other barriers included: working alone; ineffective training; and overly prescriptive requirements for reflective writing. The relationship between training in reflective writing and engaging in reflective writing was found to be significant.

#### **Recommendations for practice**

Having a clear definition of reflective practice in the library and information would be helpful to aid understanding of the concept in a professional context.

Clear guidelines should be developed in relation to reflective practice, including for reflective writing and alternative methods. Training, support and guidance should be provided to enable staff to find methods of reflection that are appropriate for their particular needs and suited to their personal style.

Employing organisations should facilitate reflection by allowing time to do so, and by embedding the practice within existing workplace structures, such as appraisal. New processes may need to be implemented such as systems to promote reflective discussions between staff within, or external to, the organisation. These initiatives would address organisational barriers to reflection.

#### **Recommendations for future research**

Future research could investigate different types of reflection and how these relate to different personality types. This study found that people react differently to the concept of reflective practice, some viewing it positively and others negatively. This conflict could be explored in future research.



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