

Refl' Action

Reflective practices: examples and elements to develop and manage a reflective activity

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Introduction: the Experimental Method and the Experiential Cycle

Let's imagine that we can dip into the past and find ourselves in the seventeenth century in Tuscany, Italy. During what is considered today as the scientific revolution, in one of the most flourishing periods of history in our thinking, a young dialectic scholar and math enthusiast is about to formalize¹ what is still remembered today as the experimental method. Galileo Galilei², born in 1564 in Pisa, is recognized as one of history's most important scientific thinkers. In addition to his significant conclusions on the heliocentric vision and the vicissitudes that see him opposed to the ecclesiastical inquisition, Galileo is still considered by many as the father of modern sciences thanks to the experimental method, which is still the basis of scientific reasoning today.

The method, which many will already know, is based on a straightforward procedure: observation of a phenomenon, the formulation of one or more hypotheses, the experiment to verify the proposed hypotheses, the analysis of the results of the experiments, the repetition of the experiments in different ways and contexts, the collection of the data that emerged for the formulation of a mathematical rule that expresses the result of the experiments. Schematized, the scientific method can be summarized in the following steps: observation; hypothesis; investigation, data collection, analysis, a second phase of the experiment, and formulation of the mathematical rule. In the first article of our research³, we mentioned Kolb's experiential cycle as an example of experiential reasoning to define our concept of reflection. Let's try to look at Galileo's method and Kolb's experiential cycle side by side.

Galileo

1. Observation
2. Hypothesis
3. Experiment
4. Data Collection and Analysis
5. Second phase of the experiment
6. Formulation of the mathematical rule

Kolb

1. Concrete experience
2. Reflective Observation
3. Abstract conceptualization
4. Active experimentation and the start of a new experience

¹ [To know more about](#)

² [To know more about](#)

³ <https://refractionproject.eu/research>

To a superficial eye, these seem highly similar, and, certainly, both methods emphasize the importance of practical experimentation to understand and verify a theory. Furthermore, both emphasize the need for careful observation and analysis of the results; but there is a considerable difference between them, and it is in this difference that the most profound meaning of reflection is expressed within experiential learning. In other words, it is what distinguishes the experiment from the experience that highlights the significance of the reflection and one of the most critical aspects of its practical implications: **the emotional experience.**

What distinguishes the concept of the experiment from the concept of experience, which we cite as the "container" of the reflexive action, is the variability generated by the emotional background, experience, personality, and skills of the person experiencing it. A scientific experiment is a controlled and repeatable procedure through which one tries to prove or disprove a theory or hypothesis. The experiment aims to collect objective and verifiable data to make confident statements about the cause-and-effect relationships between the variables involved. On the other hand, experience is the learning process that occurs through direct experience of the world around us. While the scientific experiment is a controlled and repeatable process, experiential learning is based on personal experience and reflection. This is an aspect of fundamental importance in our research because it underlines that people's emotional experience determines the reflection's objective, development, and result.

The two concepts do not conflict; they are distinct and sometimes complementary. We have proposed it here because we think it could be a useful starting point for introducing a "more practical" aspect of our research on reflection and its relationship with action. In the following pages, we will offer various examples of activities to develop reflection. Taking inspiration from previous articles, from our sources, and the programs carried out by our associations in the field of non-formal education, we will try to offer valuable tools to anyone interested in better understanding the world of reflective practices, whether it is a professional interest or related to one's daily life.

Reflective activities: structure and stories

In this section, we will start with three reflective activities and investigate the structure and methods of development, hinting at the historical roots or traditions from which these activities take their cue. The following section will describe activities with ideas and essential points to consider regarding the management and adequate development of the objectives designed for each activity.

Consider three well-known reflective practices: **Forest Bathing**, the **body scan**, and the **gratitude circle**. From a generic point of view, these practices aim to develop awareness, physical and/or mental well-being, increase productivity and deepen learning.

Forest Bathing:

DURATION: 45-60 minutes

ENVIRONMENT: Outdoor, Forest

DESCRIPTION: Forest bathing, also known as shinrin-yoku, is a practice of spending time in a forest or other natural environment to improve overall well-being. This activity involves four stages: Attention: This stage focuses on the natural environment around you, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells. You can cultivate a sense of calm and relaxation by slowing down and paying attention to nature. Awareness: With continued practice, you can deepen your connection to nature and become more aware of the natural rhythms and cycles around you. This can help you gain perspective on your life and challenges and cultivate a sense of gratitude and wonder. Answers: As your mind becomes more relaxed and open, you may start coming up with new insights and creative solutions to problems. By asking the right questions and listening to your inner voice, you can tap into a deeper understanding of yourself and the world around you. Forest bathing connects with nature, promotes relaxation and stress reduction, and fosters a sense of connection and identity with the natural world.

Forest Bathing⁴, also known as **Shinrin-yoku**, originated in Japan in the 1980s as a response to increased stress and mental health problems in Japanese society. In 1982, the Japanese government initiated a study to examine the beneficial effects of forest walks on people's physical and psychological health. The Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries coined "Shinrin-yoku," meaning "forest bathing." The practice was developed to relax and rejuvenate surrounded by nature. The first study of forest bathing practice was conducted in 1984 by the Japan Society of Forest Medicine and the Environment Health Association. This study showed that time spent

⁴ Li, Q. (2018). *Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing*. Penguin Books.

in nature could reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol and improve the immune system. Forest Bathing became popular in Japan in the 1990s. It gained international attention in 2012 when American researcher Dr. Qing Li published the book "***Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing.***"

Gratitude Circle

DURATION: 15-30 minutes

ENVIRONMENT: Any quiet, private space

DESCRIPTION: Gather in a circle and take turns sharing something you are grateful for. Encourage participants to be specific and descriptive in their sharing. Start by expressing gratitude towards yourself, by sharing something you appreciate or are proud of, and then describe something you would like from the group to feel supported or empowered. Use a gratitude tool like a rock, stick, or object to pass around the circle. This practice encourages active listening by having each participant repeat the previous person's gratitude before sharing their own. This helps to build a sense of community and connection within the group. Create a safe and supportive environment for participants to share their vulnerabilities and needs.

The **Gratitude Circle**⁵ is a practice of sharing and reflecting on what you are grateful for to increase gratitude and happiness. The practice has ancient roots in many cultures, but its modern form was developed in the United States during the 1990s. The Gratitude Circle was introduced by Jack Canfield, co-author of the Chicken Soup for the Soul book series, and his wife, Inga Canfield, who developed it as part of their work on leadership training programs. The Gratitude Circle was initially used to help participants build gratitude and an awareness of what is important in life. The practice quickly spread to the field of positive psychology, and much research has shown that expressing gratitude can improve mental and physical health, reduce stress, and improve interpersonal relationships. The Gratitude Circle is widely used today in personal development, coaching, and training programs.

Body Scan:

Duration: 10-15 minutes

Environment: Any quiet, private space

Description: Lie down or sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Focus on your breath and scan your body from head to toe, noticing any areas of tension or discomfort. Use

⁵ Lin, C. C., & Liang, C. C. (2019). *A gratitude intervention for breast cancer survivors: A study protocol*. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 75(10), 2319-2329.

your breath to release any stress or pain. Try to understand where this tension is coming from.

The Body Scan⁶ is a mindfulness practice that consists of observing and bringing awareness to the body and physical sensations present in a given moment to reduce stress and increase awareness of the body and mind. The practice was developed in the 1970s by the Institute of Preventive Medicine at the University of Iowa in the United States. The Body Scan was first introduced as part of a mindfulness-based stress reduction program developed by physician Jon Kabat-Zinn. The program, known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), was designed to help patients with chronic pain problems reduce stress and improve their quality of life. Body Scan has spread rapidly worldwide and has been adopted in many settings, including hospitals, schools, and corporate training programs. Some research has shown that body scan practice can reduce stress, improve sleep quality, and increase body and mind awareness.

The three examples cited are only starting points for activities widely recognized as valid in reflection development. However, it is helpful to remember that reflection activities should never be considered actions with their own a priori validity. The value of the reflective moment depends, first of all, on the circumstance in which this moment is inserted and, subsequently, on the management of this moment by the facilitator of the process.

The activities, practices, or moments focused on reflection are always part of a more comprehensive learning process that includes experiences, objectives, and personal and group dynamics.

The facilitator of the reflective process must recognize this aspect, whereby the reflective action must follow a specific experience to bring about results. Taking, for example, the history of forest bathing, we can observe how this practice was born of a specific need: that of decreasing the level of stress in the Japanese population of the twentieth century. This means that when a trainer decides to include an activity of this kind in his program, he must remember the process within which he wants to insert it into the premise and increase the learning points.

No pre-established guidelines tell us at which moment of a program it is more appropriate to insert moments of reflection concerning another. During this same research, the organizations involved investigated the possibility of using moments of reflection in different program slots: before, during, or at the end of an activity session.

⁶ Baer, R. A. (2003). *Mindfulness training as a clinical intervention: A conceptual and empirical review*. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 125-143.

What emerged more clearly is that the result of a reflective activity depends on many factors and that it may be helpful to consider these factors before the moment takes place while at the same time considering the goal one wants to pursue. This means the same reflective activity, carried out at different times in a program, will produce different results.

To offer a valuable tool for facilitators, trainers, or anyone who may be interested in understanding which are the most relevant aspects in the management of a practice, activity, or reflective moment, below we will highlight some elements, following and reworking what in journalism/literature is known as the five W⁷.

⁷ ["The Five Ws of Online Help"](#). by Geoff Hart, TECHWR-L. Retrieved April 30, 2012.

The five Ws in reflective practices: elements of management of reflective activities

The Five W's method is a method that is based on five fundamental questions that can help in delineating the scope and objectives of a program or activity. The five questions are as follows:

1. **What:** What is the activity you intend to carry out? What are the objectives of the activity? What are the expected results?
2. **Who:** Who will participate in the activity? What are the characteristics of the participants? What are the specific needs of the participants?
3. **When:** When will the activity take place? What are the dates and times? How long will the activity last?
4. **Where:** Where will the activity take place? What are the facilities and resources needed to run the business? Are the necessary resources available?
5. **Why:** Why will the activity take place? What are the reasons and long-term goals of the activity? What are the benefits for the participants and the organization?

The Five W Method helps structure information and clearly define program goals and expectations. It also lets you identify your needed resources and carefully plan your program implementation.

To use the five Ws method, it is essential to collect detailed information about the activities and participants and consider their specific needs. Furthermore, setting realistic and measurable goals and using evaluation tools to evaluate the activity's success is essential.

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas followed a similar method, which includes, in addition to the five questions reported in the five w method, three other aspects to refer to the quantity, the way of development, and the necessary means.

If we try to apply the method to the management of one of the activities that we have described in the previous section of this work, we will obtain a schedule that could look like this:

What: The activity is a **Gratitude Circle**, i.e., an activity during which the participants share their emotions and thoughts to exchange gratitude and mutual recognition. The **activity's objective** is to create an environment of positivity and mutual appreciation, improving the emotional well-being of the participants and the awareness of belonging to the group. Central about the "what" of a reflective activity is the guiding question that

the facilitator uses to open the activity. We must remember that the **guiding question** is our common thread with the objective and that the way it is asked has a decisive impact on the outcome of the activity and the participant's response. The very formulation of the **guiding question** must consider the target group and be asked in understandable language. That also considers the activity's emotional atmosphere, including the need to modulate the voice according to the circumstance.

Who: This point includes, on the one hand, the target group for which the activity is intended and, on the other hand, the person who manages it, the trainer, facilitator, etc. when considering a target group, it is crucial to pay attention to the characteristics of the group involved: age range, for example between 25 and 40 years, gender, social background, expectations, and motivations and consider these characteristics also about the objective we have proposed, in this case for example, the development of a climate of trust within the group.

When: In this case, it means carefully choosing the timing for adequate development of an activity and selecting the most appropriate time slots in the program in advance. You can think of both starting and ending a day of activity with a gratitude circle; the important thing is that the trainer keeps in mind the times necessary to carry it out and that he chooses the most flexible slots accordingly. Select a time slot preceded or followed by a pause so that you have some additional time should it be needed. It is good to bear in mind that all activities involving reflection and possibly sharing include different timescales (the different times required for other people to reflect cannot be foreseen a priori) and that the facilitator must bear in mind the flexibility of the timing also about the planning of the activity itself.

A Gratitude Circle session can occur at very different times concerning the target group involved and the goal designed for the activity. You can think of a minimum of thirty minutes and a maximum of an hour and a half. Still, it is important to underline the role of the facilitator in managing individual sharings. In this type of activity, it may happen that the participants' focus shifts, that emotional sharing can turn towards aspects less pertinent to the intended objective. If, on the one hand, it is always important to respect the participants' needs and needs for expression, it is equally important that the facilitator of these moments knows how to intervene with respect and sensitivity to bring the activity back toward the intended objective.

Where: A Gratitude Circle session can take place in indoor mode as well as in an outdoor way. In the first case, it is necessary to think of a room that allows the whole group to sit comfortably, paying attention to any architectural barriers in the case of the presence of participants with disabilities and physical difficulties of various kinds. In the case of outdoor use, in addition to selecting an ample space that offers the possibility of sitting comfortably even outside, it will be necessary to keep in mind the

weather conditions and any extra elements that one might want to use, such as the presence of a central fire around which to carry out the activity or the need for materials to allow for a comfortable seat.

Why: The Gratitude Circle session aims to improve the participants' emotional well-being, creating an environment of positivity and mutual appreciation. The activity should enhance collaboration within the group, reduce stress and increase overall job satisfaction. This does not mean the activity can also be driven by different objectives, perhaps turning into an itinerary.

This last aspect underlines the importance of the modality with which one chooses to manage a reflective activity. By applying the five Ws, we have highlighted the essential elements to remember for "correct" development. Still, the ancillary and unpredictable aspects that may arise in program development should be considered.

In conclusion, a trainer's sensitivity, knowledge, and attention are crucial factors in ensuring the success and safety of any training program. A trainer sensitive to their trainees' needs and abilities can tailor the program to suit their needs, leading to better learning outcomes. In addition, a trainer with extensive knowledge and experience can provide valuable insights and guidance, which can help trainees avoid common mistakes and achieve their goals more efficiently. Finally, a trainer who is attentive to possible unexpected events can quickly adapt and respond to any challenges that may arise, ensuring the safety of all participants. Therefore, it is essential for trainers to possess these qualities to provide an effective and safe training experience for their trainees.



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