
REFLECTIVE PIECE

Using a Self-assessment Wheel to Facilitate Reflection

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Abstract

As a life coach I have modified a commonly utilised tool – the Wheel of Life (Whitworth, L., Kimsey-House, H. and Davies, S. *Co-active Coaching*. Palo Alto, Ca: Davies-Black, 1998) and developed a self-assessment wheel. The purpose of this paper is to share my experience of developing and using the self-assessment wheel to facilitate reflection amongst practice educators.

Reflective practice is an important skill to master and often the challenge for many practitioners is where to start and how to develop the necessary skills in order to reflect in a meaningful way.

By discussing the link between self-assessment and reflection it is proposed that the self-assessment wheel it can help practitioners to overcome their reticence to begin the reflective process. Links are made throughout the paper with other reflective models and the flexibility of the tool is discussed alongside potential uses for the future.

Keywords: reflective practice, continuing professional development (CPD), wheel of life, practice educator

The purpose of this article is to share my experience of developing and using a self-assessment wheel to facilitate reflection among practice educators. Reflective practice is an integral part of being a professional and when combined with continuing professional development (CPD) it has the possibility to inform changes in practice, allow judgements in effective care, underpin learning and encourage a new way of thinking (Steele 1998).

CPD is now mandatory for a wide range of health care professions. However, in order for it to be meaningful and for deep learning to occur, reflective practice is essential to the process. Nonetheless, it is still evident that many professionals have difficulty in engaging with the concept of reflective practice and this had led to some scepticism among those in allied health professions who initially feel unprepared to connect with the concept (Gibbs 2011).

The ability to reflect on one's practice is relevant to all who work inter-professionally and often provides practitioners with the chance to evaluate their role within the inter-professional team. There is no doubt that reflective practice gives practitioners a

valuable opportunity to increase their self-awareness and to integrate theory with practice; however, the challenge for many practitioners is where to start and how to develop the necessary skills in order to reflect in a meaningful way.

According to Desjarlais & Smith (2011), reflective practice and self-assessment both promote meaningful learning from experience. However, it is their opinion that fundamentally they have a different purpose and different goals. Although their comparative analysis distinguishes reflection and self-assessment as two distinctly separate processes, they acknowledge that many other authors disagree. From my experience of working with a range of health care professionals at both undergraduate and postgraduate level I too question this distinction to some extent. Whilst I recognize that the purpose may differ, there is without doubt an inextricable link between the two for they are connected by the concept of self-awareness. Without self-awareness reflective practice would be futile; self-awareness is ultimately informed by self-assessment.

Lecturers and clinical staff who work with novice or student practice educators (PEs) have a pivotal role in supporting them through their journey, to motivate and inspire them, allowing them every opportunity to develop. The use of coaching skills and coaching tools also has potential to help students develop strategies that will enable them to take responsibility for enhancing their performance, to learn and develop (Besser & Wilson, cited in Passmore 2006). Raising self-awareness through the use of coaching skills can empower students and practice educators to make changes in their practice.

As an experienced educator with a special interest in practice education I am always investigating different ways of engaging practitioners in the process of reflective practice. Whilst undertaking my training as a life coach I came across a tool which is commonly used as part of the coaching process – the Wheel of Life (Whitworth *et al.* 1998). It became apparent to me that this tool did not necessarily need to be confined to a coaching relationship but could be readily modified for a range of uses (Henwood & Lister 2007). The first modification that I made was to convert the wheel into a self-assessment tool for PEs who are responsible for educating students in practice.

In preparation for using the wheel, the role of PE was broken down into skills that, first, were important and, second, were quantifiable. Eight aspects of the practice educator role were identified by using a range of PE job descriptions and through intensive consultation with existing practice educators. A consensus was reached on the eight aspects: approachability, effective communication, technical/practical skills, ability to motivate others, organisational ability, flexibility/adaptability, good role model and ability to use own initiative. Each aspect was then placed at a spoke of the wheel (Figure 1).



Figure 1 The modified self-assessment wheel for the practice educator/mentor

PEs are required to evaluate their skill level for each aspect in turn by placing a cross along the spoke. To do this, they need to give themselves a mark out of ten for how well they think they fulfil each aspect and then place a cross along each spoke, the centre representing zero and the outside of the circle representing 10. This allows the practitioner to evaluate her/his skills and identify areas for improvement. Figure 2 represents a completed wheel where a practitioner has rated all eight aspects and then joined them together, shading the final shape. This process allows the practitioner to visually capture and compare their strengths and weaknesses in specific areas of their role and as such is considered to be a main advantage of this tool. The process often elicits unexpected outcomes which surprise the PE and so leads to some useful discussion and provides opportunities for meaningful learning.

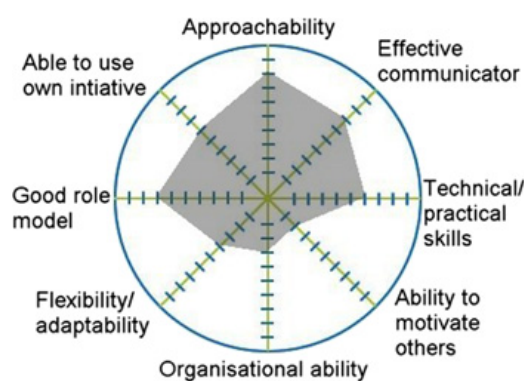


Figure 2 Completed self-assessment wheel for the practice educator/mentor

The aim of this exercise is to achieve a well-balanced wheel from which it is possible to immediately identify areas that need improvement as well as those of strength.

Figure 2 illustrates the areas in need of improvement, here flexibility/adaptability, organisational ability and the ability to motivate others; the dominant areas of strength are approachability and being a good role model. The results can then be used as a trigger for reflection and will allow the PE to explore why each area has been given a particular score, on what evidence their decision was based and guides consideration of how to improve. This process is not dissimilar to other reflective or experiential learning cycles such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs 1988) and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) and allows the PE to focus on the specific areas of their practice that require development.

Building on the use of the wheel as a self-assessment exercise, it can also provide a valuable learning opportunity with regards to peer review. In this instance, a single wheel can be used to plot two data sets – for example, the practitioner's personal evaluation and a peer/assessor's evaluation of her/him. Following the completion of two separate wheels, the parties can compare their results, noting areas of agreement and differences which are easily visible. This immediately contributes to and focuses the discussion thus enhancing both personal and professional development. As a mentor and teaching practice verifier for a range of PEs, I have found this to be a valuable learning exercise. The wheel has been successfully incorporated into the school's professional development Master's module as both a self-assessment tool integral to participants' portfolios to evidence progression and growth and as a peer evaluation tool.

To maximise the learning opportunity that the wheel offers, once the wheel is completed the findings need to be acted upon in some way. This is where a coaching background becomes invaluable to ensure not only that learning has taken place, but that the practitioner will start to make changes. With this in mind, the final part of this exercise asks the practice educators to identify an area in which they need to improve and then to outline three steps that they will take to improve their performance in this area. In focusing the PE on these three steps, commitment to action is virtually assured.

One of the reasons I believe the wheel is so successful is because it crosses the boundaries of learning styles. There is much evidence to suggest that people learn in a variety of ways. Several inventories have been formulated in an attempt to understand how these learning styles affect the way in which both children and adults experience and interpret a learning situation (Fleming & Mills 1992). For example, the VARK learning styles questionnaire designed by Fleming (1987) identifies four different learning styles: visual, auditory (aural), read (write) and kinaesthetic; the purpose of this tool is to ensure inclusivity for a range of learners and thus practice educators. I believe that by utilising the wheel the clinical/practice educators are encouraged to use visual methods to aid their reflection. This will allow those who learn predominantly via visual and kinaesthetic means to process and reflect on their experiences in this way and so enhance the quality of their reflections. Completing a self-assessment wheel is a process that offers a credible alternative to the more traditional reflective writing approaches which practitioners so often find difficult to master (Finlay 2008).

I believe the above account has shown how the Wheel of Life can be a useful tool for practice educators to enhance their level of self-awareness through self-assessment. Its versatility is one of its main strengths as it can be easily modified for application in a range of contexts. Utilising it as the first step to reflection may appeal to a variety of users with differing learning styles and as such will ultimately enhance both personal and professional growth.

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