

Reflective Learning Workshop

(2012) using The Park and General Practitioner's Story exercise

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Some resources

Books (all published by Routledge) include:

Jenny Moon (2004) A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning; (2006); Learning Journals, a handbook for reflective practice and professional development and other books etc listed on the CEMP site as below

On line materials include:

Reflection - <http://www.cemp.ac.uk/people/jennymoon/reflectivelearning.php> (50 pages)

Learning journals <http://www.cemp.ac.uk/people/jennymoon/learningjournals.php> (30pages)

Production analysis <http://www.cemp.ac.uk/people//productionanalysis/> (on reflective work for undergraduates who have a final year project that involves reflective writing on process). It is directed towards media and art and design students' work.

See also critical thinking - <http://www.cemp.ac.uk/people/jennymoon/criticalthinking.php> and academic assertiveness /academicassertivenessinhe/

Content of the Session

I give the programme for a day session – shorter sessions will cover less, but much of the material is in the handout or available from the resources above. I will not necessarily work in the order of the list below. The workshop is largely drawn from 'A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning', Jenny Moon, 2004 and 'Learning Journals – a handbook for reflective practice and professional development' (2006) both published by Routledge, London

Developing an understanding of reflection

- Defining reflective learning
- Emotion and reflection
- Learning and reflection

Understanding what reflective learning is

- A graduated scenario exercise

Reflection and the learner's conception of knowledge

Some practical ideas for helping students to reflect effectively

Assessment issues in setting reflective learning tasks

Appendix 1

Appendix 2

Developing an understanding of reflective learning

Defining reflective learning

Some vocabulary issues

The idea of reflection is a constructed one. Reflection is a behaviour that we perceive and describe in different ways. This means that people may have different definitions for it and students may find that in different modules, they are working with different definitions. It is therefore important to be clear with students what you mean by the word and to let them know that they may come across different definitions.

I have chosen to use the words reflection and reflective learning synonymously (ie as the same meaning). Reflective writing is a form of representation of reflection (there are many forms of representation such as talking, drawing, dancing....etc). Reflective practice is a term used in academic practice in many different ways. If you use the term reflective practice, decide what you mean by it and tell your students!

The definitions that I work on are as follows:

Reflection is a form of mental processing - like a form of thinking - that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. Alternatively we may simply 'be reflective', and then an outcome can be unexpected. The term 'reflection' is applied to relatively complex or ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and it largely refers to the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. Emotion is involved in various ways.

In academic situations there is more to say:

In academic contexts the notion of reflection has been developed as a tool to support learning. In an academic context, reflection is likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, with an outcome that is specified in terms of learning, action or clarification. The academic reflection may be preceded by a description of the purpose and / or the subject matter of the reflection.

The process and outcome of the reflective work is most likely to be in a represented (eg written) form and to be seen by others and to be assessed. These factors can affect its nature and quality. (From Moon, 2004)

Metaphors can be helpful too and I particularly like this idea from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (J.K. Rowling, 2000: London, Bloomsbury) in the way that it suggests that we reflect (largely) on what we know already.

'Harry stared at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original silvery white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

"What is it?" Harry asked shakily.

"This? It is called a pensieve", said Dumbledore. "I sometimes find - and I am sure that you know the feeling - that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind."

"Er", said Harry, who couldn't truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

"At these times", said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, "I use the pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form"

We re-organise our minds as we reflect - I call this 'cognitive housekeeping'. As we reorganize our minds, we learn more.

Emotion and Reflection

The role of emotion in reflection and learning seems to be a source of confusion in the literature. Texts about teaching and learning rarely do more than mention emotion and then sometimes only in its role as a block to learning. Some would suggest that recognition of emotion is central to the process of reflection (eg Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985).

I feel, with Damasio (2000) that emotion is be intimately involved in all psychological activity though we might pay more attention to it in reflecting on a topic. I have thought of the following ways in which emotion can be involved in reflection –

- **as 'emotional intelligence'** – I define this as the ability to manage the emotional states of others (ie I limit its meaning);
- **as part of the knowledge which is involved in reflection** – eg 'I know that I feel uneasy about this situation and therefore I will need to take it carefully and manage my feelings';
- **it is involved in the process of reflecting** - eg if I feel unhappy, my mood will tend to colour the manner which I reflect.
- **an outcome of reflection – emotion arises from the process of reflecting** - eg I reflect on how it was when I was on holiday in a wonderful place – and as an outcome, I can feel more positive and optimistic about other things;
- **a potential inhibitor or facilitator of reflection** – eg I am feeling as if everything is flowing along nicely- and this helps me to reflect more effectively on my dealings with a difficult person at work. Or I feel 'down' today and this steers me into reflecting negatively on my abilities as an artist (today).
- **As a trigger for reflection or the subject matter of reflection** eg I feel a sense of unease about someone and this observation leads me to reflect on what underlies that feeling;
- **and 'emotional insight'**. This is a term I use for situations in which there is sudden and substantial personal change or change in personal perception. For example, I have an intimate talk with a friend, and I somehow seem to see a difficult situation at work more clearly and can handle it better. I feel different but I am not conscious of learning anything in particular.

(Moon, 2004).

Learning and reflection

These are ways in which reflection might be involved in or enhance the process of learning:

- Reflection is part of learning where there is new material of learning (ie new material to learn) It seems that reflection is involved in meaningful learning where the learner is seeking to make sense of new material for herself, linking it to what she knows already and if necessary, modifying her prior knowledge and understandings to accommodate the new ideas. An example here is when a student is trying to understand a new concept in ecology – such as 'population' – and she needs to reflect on the relationship of the new knowledge to her broad field knowledge of biology. Rote learning does not involve reflection, is not flexible and does not enable the learner to grow in her capacity to work with knowledge.

- Reflection is associated with situations where there is no new material of learning – where we make sense of ideas (knowledge and understandings) that we have already learnt. The term ‘cognitive housekeeping’ captures some of the essence of this sorting out of ideas (Moon, 1999). The result of this reflective process is often the development of new ideas – in other words, more learning. An example here is where a student needs to evaluate her study skills over the past semester. She needs to recall difficulties and achievements and to relate them to the study ability that seems to be demanded by her level of work. It is not a straight-forward process, but one of moving around in different ideas and linking them.
- We learn from the representation of reflection. When we represent reflective thinking in writing (for example), the process of representation involves a translation of the mental form of reflection which might be seen as multidimensional to the linear and sequential form of the written word. In that re-organisation, we learn more about the topic of reflection.
- Having written down (ie represented) our reflections, in a sense it becomes new material of learning (something new to learn) and we can reinforce the learning or check our understanding of it, using the writing as a feedback system (do I really see things in this way?). The use of learning journals is an example of a method in which this mechanism is exploited.
- I suggest that there is a form of non-verbal learning that I call ‘emotional insight’ that is supported by reflective activity.
- Reflection engages the learner with the ‘messy-ness’ of learning as a process. The learner learns to cope with ill-structured material of learning.
- Reflection also facilitates learning by enhancing the conditions that seem to favour learning. These include:
 - ◆ the provision of ‘intellectual space’ (Barnett, 1997), reflecting slows the pace of learning,
 - ◆ the development of a sense of ownership of learning which has long been recognised as an important basis of learning (Rogers, 1969),
 - ◆ the development and improvement of the process of learning to learn. Students who achieve well are more often students who are aware of their own learning processes – their weaknesses and strengths (Ertmer and Newby, 1996).
 - ◆ In addition, reflective – or personally expressive writing seems sometimes to be more effective as a medium for learning (Elbow, 1973) and problem solving (Selfe and Arbabi, 1986).

- ◆ Reflection probably helps the emotional side of learning in a general manner. In simplified terms, it could be said to support the development and maintenance of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995)

Understanding what reflective learning is - a graduated scenario exercise – The Park

Some learners know what it means to reflect. Some do not. The best way in which to help a learner to understand reflection may not be to try to tell her – but to show her examples and ask her to work with them. This exercise, which does just this, has the following purposes.

- it helps teachers to understand factors that are involved in reflection;
- it helps students to start with reflective writing;
- it helps both by demonstrating the deepening of reflection;
- it can act as a means of developing tools for the evaluation or assessment of reflective work

In The Park exercise the aim is to enable participants to see what reflective writing looks like, The exercise is developed in response to the observation that students, who are asked to reflect, tend to reflect superficially. In the exercise there are four accounts of an incident in a park. They are recounted by Annie, who was involved in the incident herself. The accounts are written at different depths of reflection. The underpinning research basis of this exercise is described in Moon (2004 and 2006).

(For future use of the exercise - instructions)

Firstly, there are no copyright issues in using the exercise – though acknowledgement of the authorship would be appreciated!) The procedure for the exercise is described as a group process, though it can be used individually. The process works best when it has a facilitator, who is not engaged in the exercise. It takes around an hour. It is important that the pages are not leafed through in advance, other than as instructed - and the exercise works better when people follow the instructions. In particular, they should not begin the discussions until everyone has read the relevant account. The facilitator needs to control this. The groups can be told that there are four accounts of an incident, and that they will be reading them one after the other, with time after each session of reading for discussion about the reflective content of the account.

- ◆ The exercise is introduced as means to demonstrate that there are different depths in reflection and that deeper reflection probably equates with better learning.
- ◆ Small groups are formed (no more than six in each).
- ◆ The groups are told to turn to the first account and read it quietly to themselves considering what features that they think are reflective.
- ◆ When it is evident that most people have read the first account, the groups are invited to discuss the account and identify where and how it is reflective. They are given about seven minutes for each discussion session. They may need less time for the earlier accounts.
- ◆ After the discussion session, the participants are asked to read the next account in the sequence (and they are reminded not to turn pages beyond the account in hand).
- ◆ After the last account has been read and discussed, groups are asked to go back through all of the accounts and to identify features of the reflection that progressively change through the

accounts. For example, the accounts change from being 'story' to focusing on issues in the incident. In the later accounts there is more recognition that there are multiple perspectives etc. The groups are asked to list (eg on flip chart paper) the ways in which the accounts 'deepen'.

- ◆ In a plenary, the groups share their lists (as above) and discuss the whole exercise. It is at this stage that the participants can be referred to the Generic Framework for Reflective Writing which provides a general guide to features in deepening reflection. The accounts are not intended to accord directly with the stages described.

The Park

The Park (Account 1)

I went through the park the other day. The sun shone sometimes but large clouds floated across the sky in a breeze. It reminded me of a time that I was walking on St David's Head in Wales – when there was a hard and bright light and anything I looked at was bright. It was really quite hot – so much nicer than the day before which was rainy. I went over to the children's playing field. I had not been there for a while and wanted to see the improvements. There were several children there and one, in particular, I noticed, was in too many clothes for the heat. The children were running about and this child became red in the face and began to slow down and then he sat. He must have been about 10. Some of the others called him up again and he got to his feet. He stumbled into the game for a few moments, tripping once or twice. It seemed to me that he had just not got the energy to lift his feet. Eventually he stumbled down and did not get up but he was still moving and he shuffled into a half sitting and half lying position watching the other children and I think he was calling out to them. I don't know.

Anyway, I had to get on to get to the shop to buy some meat for the chilli that my children had asked for for their party. The twins had invited many friends round for an end-of-term celebration of the beginning of the summer holidays. They might think that they have cause to celebrate but it makes a lot more work for me when they are home. I find that their holiday time makes a lot more work.

It was the next day when the paper came through the door – in it there was a report of a child who had been taken seriously ill in the park the previous day. He was fighting for his life in hospital and they said that the seriousness of the situation was due to the delay before he was brought to hospital. The report commented on the fact that he had been lying unattended for half an hour before someone saw him. By then the other children had gone. It said that that several passers-by might have seen him looking ill and even on the ground and the report went on to ask why passers-by do not take action when they see that something is wrong. The article was headed 'Why do they 'Walk on by'? I have been terribly upset since then. James says I should not worry – it is just a headline.

The Park (2)

I went to the park the other day. I was going to the supermarket to get some meat to make the chilli that I had promised the children. They were having one of their end-of-term celebrations with friends. I wonder what drew me to the playground and why I ended up standing and watching those children playing with a rough old football? I am not sure as I don't usually look at other people's children – I just did. Anyway there were a number of kids there. I noticed, in particular, one child

who seemed to be very overdressed for the weather. I try now to recall what he looked like - his face was red. He was a boy of around 10 – not unlike Charlie was at that age – maybe that is why I noticed him to start with when he was running around with the others. But then he was beginning to look distressed. I felt uneasy about him – sort of maternal but I did not do anything. What could I have done? I remember thinking, I had little time and the supermarket would get crowded. What a strange way of thinking, in the circumstances!

In retrospect I wish I had acted. I ask myself what stopped me - but I don't know what I might have done at that point. Anyway he sat down, looking absolutely exhausted and as if he had no energy to do anything. A few moments later, the other children called him up to run about again. I felt more uneasy and watched as he got up and tried to run, then fell, ran again and fell and half sat and half lay. Still I did nothing more than look – what was going on with me?

Eventually I went on I tell myself now that it was really important to get to the shops. It was the next day when the paper came through the door that I had a real shock. In the paper there was a report of a child who had been taken seriously ill in the park the previous day. He was fighting for his life in the hospital and the situation was much more serious because there had been such a delay in getting help. The report commented on the fact that he had been lying, unattended, for half an hour or more. At first, I wondered why the other children had not been more responsible. The article went on to say that several passers-by might have seen him playing and looking ill and the report questioned why passers-by do not take action when they see that something is wrong.

The event has affected me for some days but I do not know where to go or whom to tell. I do want to own up to my part in it to someone though.

The Park (3)

The incident happened in Ingle Park and it is very much still on my mind. There was a child playing with others. He looked hot and unfit and kept sitting down but the other children kept on getting him back up and making him play with them. I was on my way to the shop and only watched the children for a while before I walked on. Next day it was reported in the paper that the child had been taken to hospital seriously ill – very seriously ill. The report said that there were several passers-by in the park who had seen the child looking ill and who had done nothing. It was a scathing report about those who do not take action in such situations.

Reading the report, I felt dreadful and it has been very difficult to shift the feelings. I did not stop to see to the child because I told myself that I was on my way to the shops to buy food for a meal that I had to cook for the children's party – what do I mean that *I had to* cook it?. Though I saw that the child was ill, I didn't do anything. It is hard to say what I was really thinking at the time – to what degree I was determined to go on with my day in the way I had planned it (the party really was not that important was it?). Or did I genuinely not think that the boy was ill – but just over-dressed and a bit tired? To what extent did I try to make convenient excuses and to what extent was my action based on an attempt to really understand the situation? Looking back, I could have cut through my excuses at the time – rather than now.

I did not go over to the child and ask what was wrong but I should have done. I could have talked to the other children - and even got one of the other children to call for help. I am not sure if the help

would have been ambulance or doctor at that stage – but it does not matter now. If he had been given help then, he might not be fighting for his life.

It would be helpful to me if I could work out what I was really thinking and why I acted as I did. This event has really shaken me to my roots – more than I would have expected. It made me feel really guilty. I do not usually do wrong, in fact I think of myself as a good person. This event is also making me think about actions in all sorts of areas of my life. It reminds me of some things in the past as when my uncle died – but then again I don't really think that that is relevant - he was going to die anyway. My bad feelings then were due to sheer sadness and some irrational regrets that I did not visit him on the day before. Strangely it also reminds me of how bad I felt when Charlie was ill while we went on that anniversary weekend away. As I think more about Charlie being ill, I recognise that there are commonalities in the situations. I also keep wondering if I knew that boy....

The Park (4)

It happened in Ingle Park and this event is very much still on my mind. It feels significant. There was a child playing with others. He looked hot and unfit and kept sitting down but the other children kept on getting him back up and making him play with them. I was on my way to the shop and only watched the children for a while before I walked on. Next day it was reported in the paper that the child had been taken to hospital seriously ill – very seriously ill. The report said that there were several passers-by in the park who had seen the child looking ill and who had done nothing. It was a scathing report about those who do not take action in such situation.

It was the report initially that made me think more deeply. It kept coming back in my mind and over the next few days - I began to think of the situation in lots of different ways. Initially I considered my urge to get to the shop – regardless of the state of the boy. That was an easy way of excusing myself – to say that I had to get to the shop. Then I began to go through all of the agonising as to whether I could have mis-read the situation and really thought that the boy was simply over-dressed or perhaps play-acting or trying to gain sympathy from me or the others. Could I have believed that the situation was all right? All of that thinking, I now notice, would also have let me off the hook – made it not my fault that I did not take action at the time.

I talked with Tom about my reflections on the event – on the incident, on my thinking about it at the time and then immediately after. He observed that my sense of myself as a 'good person who always lends a helping hand when others need help' was put in some jeopardy by it all. At the time and immediately after, it might have been easier to avoid shaking my view of myself than to admit that I had avoided facing up to the situation and admitting that I had not acted as 'a good person'. With this hindsight, I notice that I can probably find it more easy to admit that I am not always 'a good person' and that I made a mistake in retrospect than immediately after the event. I suspect that this may apply to other situations.

As I think about the situation now, I recall some more of the thoughts – or were they feelings mixed up with thoughts? I remember a sense at the time that this boy looked quite scruffy and reminded me of a child who used to play with Charlie. We did not feel happy during the brief period of their friendship because this boy was known as a bully and we were uneasy either that Charlie would end up being bullied, or that Charlie would learn to bully. Funnily enough we were talking about this boy – I now remember – at the dinner table the night before. The conversation had reminded me of all of the agonising about the children's friends at the time. The fleeting thought / feeling was possibly

something like this:– if this boy is like one I did not feel comfortable with – then maybe he deserves to get left in this way. Maybe he was a brother of the original child. I remember social psychology research along the lines of attributing blame to victims to justify their plight. Then it might not have been anything to do with Charlie’s friend.

So I can see how I looked at that event and perhaps interpreted it in a manner that was consistent with my emotional frame of mind at the time. Seeing the same events without that dinner-time conversation might have led me to see the whole thing in an entirely different manner and I might have acted differently. The significance of this whole event is chilling when I realise that my lack of action nearly resulted in his death – and it might have been because of an attitude that was formed years ago in relation to a different situation.

This has all made me think about how we view things. The way I saw this event at the time was quite different to the way I see it now – even this few days later. Writing an account at the time would have been different to the account – or several accounts that I would write now. I cannot know what ‘story’ is ‘true’. The bullying story may be one that I have constructed retrospectively - fabricated. Interestingly I can believe that story completely.

In deepening reflection, there are shifts –

- from description to reflective account;
- from no questions to questions to responding to questions;
- emotional influence is recognised, and then handled increasingly effectively
- there is a 'standing back from the event'
- there is a shift from self questioning, challenge to own ideas
- from recognition of relevance of prior experience
- in the taking into account of others' views
- towards metacognition - review of own reflective processes

Commentary on the reflection in the accounts

The Park (1) *This piece tells the story. Sometimes it mentions past experiences, sometimes anticipates the future but all in the context of the account of the story. There might be references to emotional state, but the role of the emotions on action is not explored.*

Ideas of others are mentioned but not elaborated or used to investigate the meaning of the events. The account is written only from one point of view – that of Annie.

Generally ideas are presented in a sequence and are only linked by the story. They are not all relevant or focused

In fact – you could hardly deem this to be reflective at all. It is very descriptive. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that could serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though it hardly signals any material for reflection – other than the last few words

The Park (2) *In this account there is a description of the same events. There is very little addition of ideas from outside the event – reference to attitudes of others, comments.*

The account is more than a story though. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question to be asked and answered.

In the questioning there is recognition of the worth of exploring the motives for behaviour – but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

Annie is critical of her actions and in her questions, signals this. The questioning of action does mean that Annie is standing back from the event to a small extent. There is a sense that she recognises that this is a significant incident, with learning to be gained – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

The Park (3) *The description is succinct here – just sufficient to raise the issues. Extraneous information is not added. It is not a story. The focus is on the attempt to reflect on the event and to learn from it. There is more of a sense of Annie standing back from the event in order to reflect better on her actions and in order to be more effectively critical.*

There is more analysis of the situation and an evident understanding that it was not a simple situation – that there might be alternative explanations or actions that could be justified equally effectively.

The description could be said to be slightly narrow (see The Park (4)) as Annie is not acknowledging that there might be other ways of perceiving the situation – other points of view. She does not seem to be recognising that her reflection is affected by her frame of reference at the time or now. It is

possible, for example, that her experience with Charlie (last paragraph) – or her question about knowing the boy have influenced the manner in which she reacted. It might not just be a matter of linking up other events, but of going beyond and checking out the possibility that her frame of reference might have been affected by the prior experiences.

The Park (4) *The account is succinct and to the point. There is some deep reflection here that is self-critical and questions the basis of the beliefs and values on which the behaviour was based. There is evidence of standing back from the event, of Annie treating herself as an object acting within the context.*

There is also an internal dialogue – a conversation with herself in which she proposes and further reflects on alternative explanations.

She shows evidence of looking at the views of others (Tom) and of considering the alternative point of view, and learning from it.

She recognises the significance of the effect of passage of time on her reflection –eg that her personal frame of reference at the time may have influenced her actions and that a different frame of reference might have lead to different results.

She notices that the proximity of other, possibly unrelated events (the dinner-time conversation) have an effect either possibly on her actual behaviour and her subsequent reflection – or possibly on her reflective processes only. She notices that she can be said to be reconstructing the event in retrospect – creating a story around it that may not be 'true'.

She recognises that there may be no conclusion to this situation – but that there are still things to be learnt from it.

She has also been able to reflect on her own process of reflecting (acted metacognitively), recognising that her process influenced the outcome.

A Generic Framework for Reflective Writing

This is the general model of reflective writing that underlies all of the graduated scenario exercises. There are four 'levels' of depth of reflection described below. They do not necessarily accord directly with the accounts in exercises such as 'The Park' but provide a general guide.

Descriptive Writing

This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection. It may tell a story but from one point of view at a time and generally one point at a time is made. Ideas tend to be linked by the sequence of the account / story rather than by meaning. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.

There may be references to emotional reactions but they are not explored and not related to behaviour.

The account may relate to ideas or external information, but these are not considered or questioned and the possible impact on behaviour or the meaning of events is not mentioned.

There is little attempt to focus on particular issues. Most points are made with similar weight.

The writing could hardly be deemed to be reflective at all. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that would serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though a good description that

precedes reflective accounts will tend to be more focused and to signal points and issues for further reflection.

Descriptive account with some reflection

This is a descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection.

The basic account is descriptive in the manner of description above. There is little addition of ideas from outside the event, reference to alternative viewpoints or attitudes to others, comment and so on. However, the account is more than just a story. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question or there are questions to be asked and answered. Points on which reflection could occur are signalled.

There is recognition of the worth of further exploring but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

The questioning does begin to suggest a 'standing back from the event' in (usually) isolated areas of the account.

The account may mention emotional reactions, or be influenced by emotion. Any influence may be noted, and possibly questioned.

There is a sense of recognition this is an incident from which learning can be gained, – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

Reflective writing (1)

There is description but it is focused with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. There may be a sense that the material is being mulled around. It is no longer a straight-forward account of an event, but it is definitely reflective.

There is evidence of external ideas or information and where this occurs, the material is subjected to reflection.

The account shows some analysis and there is recognition of the worth of exploring motives or reasons for behaviour

Where relevant, there is willingness to be critical of the action of self or others. There is likely to be some self questioning and willingness also to recognise the overall effect of the event on self. In other words, there is some 'standing back' from the event.

There is recognition of any emotional content, a questioning of its role and influence and an attempt to consider its significance in shaping the views presented.

There may be recognition that things might look different from other perspectives, that views can change with time or the emotional state. The existence of several alternative points of view may be acknowledged but not analysed.

In other words, in a relatively limited way the account may recognise that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time but it does not deal with this in a way that links it effectively to issues about the quality of personal judgement.

Reflective writing (2)

Description now only serves the process of reflection, covering the issues for reflection and noting their context. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and internal dialogue.

The account shows deep reflection, and it incorporates a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change.

A metacognitive stance is taken (ie critical awareness of one's own processes of mental functioning – including reflection).

The account probably recognises that events exist in a historical or social context that may be influential on a person's reaction to them. In other words, multiple perspectives are noted.

Self questioning is evident (an 'internal dialogue' is set up at times) deliberating between different views of personal behaviour and that of others).

The view and motives of others are taken into account and considered against those of the writer.

There is recognition of the role of emotion in shaping the ideas and recognition of the manner in which different emotional influences can frame the account in different ways.

There is recognition that prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of current behaviour.

There is observation that there is learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted.

There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing.

The exercise is devised by Jenny Moon, CEMP, Bournemouth University. If you want to copy it or use it or modify it, feel free to do so – there are no copyright issues. The best thing to do is to write your own accounts – perhaps using the framework as a guide if it works

Reflection and the learner's conception of the structure of knowledge (epistemological development); and an illustrative exercise

I feel strongly that the ability to reflect effectively (ie to enable further learning from the process of reflection) relies on the level of sophisticating of thinking of the learner. There are some convincing studies of the quality of thinking that suggest that during the period of higher education we need to be supporting substantial change in students' ability to process knowledge. I see this topic as of particular importance to anyone involved in facilitating any area of student learning. The topic is discussed in most of my books (eg Critical Thinking, a exploration in theory and practice (2008) and in 'We Seek it Here...'at <http://www.ESCalate.ac.uk/2041>

I will briefly talk about the work of

- Perry (1970)
- Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986)
- King and Kitchener (1994)
- Baxter Magolda (1992 – and later work)
- Lucas (2007)

I make the following generalisations from these studies:

- There are great similarities in what the studies reveal
- All of these studies see epistemological development as occurring in stages – and assume that most people do not reach the highest level of understanding of the nature of knowledge
- they suggest that there are significant changes in epistemological beliefs during the period of higher education

To illustrate epistemological development I pick up the work of Baxter Magolda because it is easiest to comprehend. Baxter Magolda's scheme is in four stages, all applicable to higher education students. Her sample was 100 college students on their undergraduate programme. Only four students reached the highest stage of epistemological development (ie contextual knowing). The stages are

Stage of Absolute Knowing . This is the least developed stage in Baxter Magolda's scheme. Knowledge is seen as certain or absolute. Learners believe that absolute answers exist in all areas of knowledge. When there is uncertainty it is because there is not yet access to the 'right' answers. Learners at this stage may recognise that opinions can differ between experts but they see this as differences of detail, opinion or misinformation. Formal learning is seen as a matter of absorption of the knowledge of the experts (eg teachers). Learning methods are seen as those that concern absorption and good memory of fact. Assessment is simply checking what knowledge the learner has 'acquired'. Knowledge is a commodity and learners are there to 'get' it and teachers 'pass it over' to learners.

Transitional knowing: Here learners have come to have doubts about the certainty of knowledge and they begin to accept that there is some uncertainty. They see that authorities may differ in view because of the uncertainty. Learners see themselves as needing to understand rather than just acquire knowledge so that they may make

judgements as to how best to apply knowledge. Teachers are seen as facilitating the understanding and the application of knowledge and assessment concerns these qualities, and not just acquisition.

Independent knowing: Independent knowers recognise the uncertainty of knowledge, and feel that everyone has her own opinion or beliefs. This seems to be an embryonic form of the more sophisticated stage of contextual knowing. The learning processes are changed by this new view because now learners can expect to have an opinion of their own and can begin to think through issues and to express themselves in a valid manner. They have to make judgements and they also regard their peers as having useful contributions to make in helping them to make up their minds. They will expect teachers to support the development of their independent views, and to provide a context for exploration. However 'In the excitement over independent thinking, the idea of judging some perspectives as better or worse is overlooked' (Baxter Magolda 1992:55). In other words, learners do not sufficiently contextualise their understanding and cannot yet see the role of context as having a bearing on the judgement.

Contextual knowing: Knowledge is understood to be constructed and any judgement must be made on the basis of the quality of the construction and of the evidence in that context. The context is important and opinions must now be supported by evidence and recognition of contextual influence. The view of the teacher is of a partner in the development of appropriate knowledge. The learner sees herself as a constructor of knowledge and engages in that process.

Some further points:

- Few undergraduates seem to reach consistent contextual thinking (on the basis of Baxter Magolda, Lucas and common observation) but this quality of thinking should characterise the Master's level graduate.
- Learners do not move through the stages of knowing in a neat and tidy progression, but shift back and forth depending on the nature of knowledge with which they are dealing. However, in a higher education undergraduate environment there really must be progression from absolute knowing towards contextual knowing.

Some practical ideas for helping students to reflect effectively

I said above that initially students may not understand what you want them to do when you ask them to write reflectively. Eventually they start writing, but it is a common observation that the reflection is very superficial. The following material is a two stage approach to presenting and then enabling students to deepen their reflective writing. Choose whatever exercises or approaches suit you or your group. I do, however, suggest that you start with The Park or a similar graduated scenario.

The first stage – presenting reflection:

What is reflection?

Students need to know that they all can reflect, but that it may not be a habit that some use in a conscious manner. It can be helpful to give them a simple definition. For example, that reflection is a form of thinking that deals with more complex or unstructured issues in a considered manner. It may be a matter of 'making sense of ideas, or 're-ordering thoughts'. If students do not understand what it is to 'be reflective', it can be useful to almost trick them into being reflective for a moment by asking them, for example, to think and talk about what they have learnt most from recent experiences – such as from the past year of being in higher education. They are likely to be reflective.

Consider why reflection is being used to facilitate the current area of their learning

The answer might include the notion that that reflection is used to make sense of unstructured situations in order to generate new knowledge. It is important to be clear that the activity might be introducing the *skill* of reflective learning or *generating knowledge* by using reflection to make sense of something.

Consider how reflection differs from more familiar forms of learning

We tend to use reflection when we are trying to make sense of how diverse ideas fit together, when we are trying to relate new ideas to what we already know or when new ideas challenge what we already know (ie taking a deep approach to learning).

The issues around the use of the first person – 'I'.

Most students will have learnt that they should not use the first person singular in an academic environment. They can be confused if they are suddenly being encouraged to use 'I'. It may be helpful here to talk about the manner in which knowledge is constructed with the involvement of the individual knower. The use of the first person can be an acknowledgement of this process.

Give examples of reflective writing – good and poor / deep and superficial.

Students find real examples of reflective writing, learning journals, even published work (fiction or biography) helpful. 'The Park' provides an example of reflective writing. An important matter to stress is that reflection is not simply description of an event.

Generate discussion of students' conceptions of reflection

It is useful at some stage (perhaps as a spin-off from another activity) to encourage students to talk about what they think reflection is. This will provide an opportunity for misconceptions to come to light (eg due to cultural differences). For example, some students will consider that they only use reflection when something has gone wrong – deciding what could be done better next time. Some students from overseas

will not have a word for 'reflection' in the sense used here, in their first languages and may need much more thorough discussion.

Enable practice on reflective writing and provide opportunities for feedback

Students can be asked to reflect on their own performance in some activity (for example - in giving a 5 minute talk). They talk and then write a reflective account of how their performance went, weaknesses and strengths, assessment against their expectations, relationships to presentations given before etc. The impact of the activity can be increased if they are asked to write a descriptive account of their performance before they write reflectively. It is important not to give them the impression that reflection is simply evaluation of weaknesses or weaknesses and strengths.

Give a starting exercise that eliminates the blank page.

Blank pages are threatening to many (though exciting to some). It is a good idea to get students started on their reflective work by getting them to do some reflective writing before they know they have really started. This will mean the development of some structure such as questions that will stimulate reflective writing.

Have other tools available to help students to get started.

There are plenty of exercises to encourage reflective writing. The use of these exercises in occasional class situations can help students to expand the areas in which they are thinking and to begin to deepen their reflection. Examples of activities are in Moon 2004, 2006).

Expect to support some students more than others

Some students will need much more support than others and they will not necessarily be the less able students. It may be possible to develop a system of peer support.

Be open about your need to learn about this form of learning and how to manage it

Demonstrating that it is not only students who need to learn to reflect can be very helpful for staff and students. Staff might write a learning journal about the process of helping students to learn reflectively – and share elements of it with the students.

The second stage, deepening reflective work

The deepening of reflective activity depends partly on developing awareness of the constructed nature of knowledge – understanding, for example:

- that events can be conceived of differently according to the frame of reference;
- of the role of emotions in guiding our conceptions of events or people;
- that different disciplines rely on different structures of knowledge and have different ways of working with knowledge.

Use examples to demonstrate deeper reflective activity

To put emphasis on depth in reflection, the second use of a graduated scenario exercise may be helpful. The focus now would be on the more sophisticated and deeper levels of reflection in each and the use of the associated criteria. This is supported by the Generic Framework for Reflective Writing

Introduce exercises that involve 'standing back from oneself'.

Ask students write about their own processes of doing a complex activity using a semi-objective and critical stance. They might, for example, be asked to talk about and assess their own skills in their processes of learning something.

Introduce exercises that involve reflection on the same subject from different viewpoints of people / social institutions etc.

Students could be asked to reflect (or talk / present) on an event in a shop from the point of view of the supervisor, customer, counter assistant, onlooker and so on. The aim is to help them to recognise that it is legitimate to have different frames of reference for the same event.

Introduce an exercise in reflection on the same subject from viewpoints of different disciplines

In terms of different disciplinary standpoints, students might be asked to describe a child's pet dog from the point of view of practitioners in sociology, psychology, medical sciences, English, art and so on.

Introduce an exercise that involves reflection that is influenced by emotional reactions to events

Students can be asked to describe a real or imaginary event and to write fictitious reflective accounts at periods after the event, each account illustrating a change of emotional orientation to the event. The important point here is that emotional state of a person influences the manner in which a subject is viewed. If the state changes, the view may change and completely different accounts may be written at different times. This may need to be taken into account in making judgements or writing reflective accounts.

Collaborative methods of deepening reflection –eg critical friends and group, activities etc.

Some of these methods involve small group or pair work. The groups will need to have common ideas about methods by which to deepen reflection and to see themselves as peer facilitators. The groups or pairs may work together over a period, learning how best to help each other by prompting and asking questions, querying frames of reference and so on.

Second-order reflection

Second order reflection is represented in any technique that requires a student to look through previous reflective work and write a reflective overview. A convenient way to do this is the double entry journal. Students write only on one page of a double

spread or on one half of a vertically divided page. They leave space blank until at another time, they go through the initial material writing generating further comments that emerge from their more coherent overview of the initial work.

Assessment issues in setting reflective learning tasks such as learning journals

I refer here mostly to learning journals but the same applies to any form of reflective writing. There are some who argue that journals and reflective writing should not be assessed. This comment from a convinced proponent of journals sums up some of the issues.

'How can you mark an individual's own personal development? I think it's a right and proper part of education for us to encourage students to express their feelings so that they know it's alright to have those feelings. However, for me to mark those feelings seems inconsistent and incongruent. Marks can also create a barrier or obstacle to the person finding his or her own voice...' (Sister Craig cited in Dillon, 1983)

It is very easy to go along with arguments that assessment of reflective writing or journals is intrusive on personal development or is too difficult. However, there are strong arguments for the development of assessment regimes. First, the fact is that students *are being* assessed on journals and reflective writing whether they are given marks or assessed on the basis of 'competent' or 'not yet competent', or pass or fail / not yet pass. The criteria being used are often 'gut reactions' or personal interpretations and this poor quality of marking is not fair to students. When reflection and reflective practice are so highly esteemed in some areas of education and professional development, we should be able to do better than this.

A second justification for assessing journals is based on the observation that, even able learners may not find reflective writing in a journal easy (Wildman and Niles, 1987). Unless teachers have an understanding of the task that they are setting and the qualities in it that constitute a good performance, they will not be able to help these learners. It will be in the process of understanding what constitutes good reflective writing that we will begin to understand ways in which we can assess it.

Thirdly, reflective writing is rooted in the nature of the higher education system as it exists at present. Many students have become strategic and often do not pay attention to work that is not assessed. If we believe that reflective writing and journals contribute to learning, then the assessment of journals may be necessary in order to ensure the requisite student effort.

Too often, journal writing and other reflective learning tasks are set without thought being given as to how they are to be assessed. Students should be told the purpose for the journal and the basis or criteria for the assessment of them before they start writing anything. As the earlier parts of this document suggest, there are many different purposes for journals.

Two key questions to be considered in developing assessment regimes for journals are whether we are looking to assess the *process* of reflection or the *product* of learning. As an example of the latter, Selfe, Petersen and Nahrgang (1986) describe the use of journals with mathematics students. The aim of the work was not primarily to develop reflective skills in these students, but to improve their learning of mathematics. The quality of their reflection could be said to be incidental. A maths test would assess the learning in this case. However, among, for example, social work students, the primary aim of using journals is likely to be to produce reflective professionals. Then it would be necessary to assess criteria relating to reflective processes.

The next issue relates mainly to those situations in which it is the process of reflective writing that is assessed and it concerns the details of the purpose for which the journal has been set. If a journal has been set with the explicit intention of encouraging critical thinking through reflective work, then it should be the extent to which critical thinking is demonstrated in the work that represents the main criteria for assessment.

It is important to remember that any method of assessing journals which involves an assessor looking at the journal writing itself has an effect on the manner in which the journal is written because students will try to write what they think is required. They may be wary of revealing personal difficulties, weaknesses or concerns. However, for a student to censor what she writes in the journal (eg to reveal, or not to reveal some weakness), she will need to reflect on the initial issue. In this case, the journal writing may be more valuable for the unwritten reflection that the exercise of journal writing encourages rather than that which is subsequently described in writing.

So where journals are to be assessed directly, there should be a stated purpose for the journal that is reflected in chosen assessment. Sometimes there may be other criteria to be included in the assessment to improve the quality of the task. Some might be:

- Length, presentation and legibility, number of entries or regularity of entries;
- Clarity and good observation in presentation of events or issues;
- Evidence of speculation;
- Evidence of critical thinking and willingness to revise ideas,
- Honesty and self assessment;
- Thoroughness of reflection and self awareness;
- A deep approach to journal subject matter; depth, detail in the structure and writing;
- Evidence of creative thinking;
- Use of skills of manipulation of knowledge (synthesis, analysis, evaluation etc);
- Relationship of the entries in the journal to relevant coursework, theory, etc.
- 'Multidimensionality' – the breadth of sources from which material in a journal is drawn.
- etc

A more desirable form of assessment of journals?

I have described direct methods of assessing journals above. However, I suggest that the best way to assess journals and most reflective work is indirect. Students are asked to write a separate piece that broadly describes what they have learned (or other words – see below) from their journal writing. It is the indirect piece that is assessed. I suggest that this is not seen as or called an essay, but an account or other term. The account will relate to the purpose for which the journal has been set and it will need to be consistent with any criteria/ definitions used for reflection. The title of the account will need to relate to the purpose for which the journal has been set (eg 'What I have learned about reflection as a result of writing the journal'). Assessing such a piece of writing will be more familiar to tutors and there are other advantages too

There are decisions to be made. One is whether or not to ask to see the actual journals. If the journal is not to be viewed, then some students will not write a journal, they will just write the account. On this basis, viewing the journal may be necessary. Then there is the issue that some journals will be exceptionally detailed etc and others will have been written on three pages after the account has been written – and the night before they are due to be handed in. To control the quality of journals, it can be useful to give some assessment to the journal. This might be pass or fail and it could be that where journals are not good enough, there will be no mark or a minimum mark for the account. Another way of doing this that allows credit to be given for an excellent journal, is to say that journals need to meet a few well considered criteria – that relate to its purpose. For those that do not meet the criteria, there might be a reduction of the mark for the account by a small amount (eg 5 percent) and for excellent journals, the mark could be lifted by a small amount. For most students with adequate journals, though, there would be an unadjusted mark for the account.

Appendix 1

'Results' for Baxter Magolda's Conceptions of Knowledge exercise

Absolute knowing –knowledge is certain or absolute;

I just like to listen – just sit and take notes from an overhead. The material is right there. And if you have a problem, you can ask the teacher and he can explain it to you. You hear it, you see it and then you can write it down (p 73)

I like getting involved with the class – by answering questions and asking questions. Even if you think you know everything, there are still questions you can ask. When the lecturer asks questions, you can try to answer them to your best ability. Don't just let the lecturer talk to you, have him present questions to you (p 73)

I have to see what I'm learning, and I have to know why. I have a good memory and it's very easy for me to memorise facts. The advantage is that it's kind of cut and dried. The information is there – all you have to do is to soak it up in your brain (p77).

I like teachers who will give you as much as you need and not just leave you with a little small idea and have you talk it out. I like it when they give you a lot of information. Then you can discuss it (p31)

In my opinion, the best way to learn is to listen in class and not be distracted (p34)

Transitional knowing – There is partial certainty and partial uncertainty

My French teacher is getting away from the book exercises because everyone falls asleep. She's started getting us into group discussions using our reading, but she corrects our tenses and sentence structure. It's much more real, much more practical and I think that's what we need. People are glad to be learning something that we can actually use (p 39)

When you've got fifty other people in the room challenging your views every ten seconds, you learn to assimilate everything. You try to piece out what you think is the best out of a conglomerate whole. That's the best (p105)

I had a different teacher in the sophomore level of the subject, and I learned to interpret things differently. When you have someone else give you a different interpretation of the same subject, you're forced to go back and do comparisons. And I thought, well, why would this person teach this subject this way and be successful and at the same time there's a person teaching it in a different way but still being successful? It begins to change you a bit (p103).

We'd start a class having read the material and then the lecturer would walk in and say something completely wrong. A shout would break out from the back of the class and we'd just start knocking at each other going back and forth at the same topic for the entire class period. Doing that just ingrains in your mind that no matter how right you think you are, you've got to hear somebody else out because they're to some extent right too (p105)

I have a tutor this semester who puts an outline on the board, of things he's going to cover. That way, even if I don't have the clearest notes – at least I know what he intended to cover.

Independent knowing – Learning is uncertain – everyone has her own beliefs

I've decided that the only person that you can really depend on is yourself. Each individual has their own truth. No-one has the right to decide 'this has to be your truth too' (p136)

I don't set anything that I feel in cement, which is what I did before. I've found that my foundations completely crumbled out from under me when I went on that exchange programme. I had to rebuild them for myself, which is the best thing that ever happened to me (p 137)

I want to be challenged. I am in a gender theory course that has a lot of women's studies students in it. There I feel challenged. My own politics are closely like theirs, but I don't have the background that they have. When I speak up, I have to really concentrate on what I think, communicate it effectively, and then when there's a discrepancy between what I think and what someone else thinks then I feel I can grow (p53)

It's funny. You read the same thing yet people see three different stories or three different meanings or interpretations. It helps you to reaffirm your own opinion, modify it or whatever is necessary (p50)

I guess I take everything in and then I go home at night and kind of sort out what I want and what I don't want. Some things, I guess – maybe because of my morals and values – will sit better with me and will seem like fact for me. And other things, I'm just like "I don't really think so". And I throw them out (p141)

Contextual knowing – Knowledge is constructed and any judgement must be made on the basis of the evidence in that context.

As you hear other people's opinions, you piece together what you really think. Who has the valid point? Whose point is not valid in your opinion? And (you) come to some other new understanding. Even if it's the same basic belief, maybe (you will be) able to look at it from a more (multi)dimensional perspective (p173).

I spent time getting a general feel for the topic as a whole before I made any generalisations. And then, after that, I started piecing together any general ideas that I believed in or general principles that I then tried to defend....And if it seemed like I was going against that principle too often or disagreeing with it too often, then I would sit down and reevaluate. Like maybe I'd learned something new that changed my way of thinking. So then I'd have to sit down and reevaluate that and then possibly change my mind accordingly (p174)

It's super-subjective. It is largely a matter of weighing other people's opinions and their facts against what you, yourself, have previously processed (p59)

In some classes, particularly when you're talking politics, you have people that are super-fired up on the left and on the right. Those people who are totally impassioned by their thoughts and feelings help to offset each other, so you can kind of arrive at something in the middle. You have then to take it in and let it process before you form a reaction (p59)

You can look at an issue from both sides and it's still history and you're still getting those facts and those different opinions about things and that's a kind of basis. But now you're taking that and working with it to come up with some sort of conclusion, or maybe not a conclusion and that's the conclusion in itself (p177)

Appendix 2 An alternative graduated scenario: General Practitioner's story

The same methods and support material as used for The Park (see earlier in this handout) apply to this exercise

Account 1

Early January – it is always like that – cold outside, hot and airless inside and the post Christmas ailments come pouring in. I had had a bad night. Our 17-year old had gone out clubbing with her friends and phoned at 2.00am, unable to find a taxi - would one of us come and get her. As soon as the phone was down, Julia, my wife, plausibly argued the case for staying in bed because of her teaching day the next day. (What about my long list in the surgery today?). I didn't argue – just got up and went. It was hard getting up in the morning and it was a particularly long list of the worried well, with coughs and colds and 'flu' being used to hide their family discords and boredoms with work. I'm cynical – OK.

I was getting towards the end when the door opened on Marissa. She came in, – hunched shoulders, grey faced as usual – and clutching her bag in that peculiar way. She is 30, but always manages to look twice her age. Our practice is well aware of Marissa and her aches and pains. I was a bit surprised to see her because she had not been on the list when I first saw it this morning so that meant that Trisha, our receptionist, must have squeezed her in. Trisha's expertise at judging who needs to be 'squeezed in' is usually accurate and would not usually include the heartsinks like Marissa.

I welcomed Marissa in. She had a wrenched shoulder this time and she said that it had happened when she was lifting a bed in her mother's house. It was a slightly unusual one for Marissa. She was more of the tummy-ache and headache brigade. I had a quick look and prescribed painkillers. I typed the prescription and looked up, expecting the relieved look, but it was not there and she asked me if the painkillers would really take away the pain. I was a bit perplexed and I asked her why she had been moving furniture. She started to tell me how she had decided to move back to live with her mother. In my tired state at this end of the morning, I prompted questions about her family relationships and she seemed to open up. I felt I was doing the right thing – even felt noble about giving her the time on that morning, but I knew I was not very 'sharp' about it. I thought that just letting her talk for a few moments was probably helpful to her.

Marissa had been born long after the other children and felt as if she had been seen as a nuisance, particularly by her mother. But now she could not cope alone and was moving back in with this cold mother. I had got her talking and I brightened, thinking I was doing a good job. I wondered why I had not let this talk flow before. We ran out of time, and I asked her to come back to talk more. I was thinking that we might be able to get on top of these recurrent visits to the surgery.

I did actually feel better after seeing her. My attitude to my 'success' with her changed the next week. Marissa did come back – but not to me. She chose to come back when Geoff, the senior partner, was on. She was still complaining about the shoulder and she told Geoff that I had obviously thought that her shoulder was to do with her family – but it was not and she needed more than painkillers. Looking at the shoulder, Geoff agreed with her and referred her for physiotherapy. This little incident has perturbed me a bit. It stirred up my professional pride. I had thought I was doing a good job.

Account 2

There was a recent event that made me think a bit about the way I see patients and the manner in which I work with them. I'd had a short night and there were some bad feelings around at home. It was difficult to feel on top of the job and to cap it, was also early January. We tend to get into the surgery lots of patients with the after effects of the Christmas period then – the colds, the 'flu's and those who do not want to go back to work. All this makes me irritable when the lists of genuinely ill patients are almost too long to manage. I am not sure how much this generally bad start had to do with the event – how much has my own state to do with how I function?

So it was the end of this particularly long morning when Marissa walked in. Marissa had not been on the list that I had seen earlier and I was surprised that Trisha (the receptionist) had added her – since it is the 'genuinely' ill patients who are added once the list has been made up. Marissa is a regular with minor aches and pain. Sometimes there is just not time for these patients - but how do we solve that? I welcomed Marissa. She was pale and hunched as usual. She told me that she had a wrenched shoulder from when she had been moving a

bed in her mother's house. I had a quick look: I had probably diagnosed a simple muscular sprain even before I examined her shoulder. I made out prescription for painkillers. When I looked up, she was still looking at me and asked if the painkillers would really take the pain away. I was surprised at her question – and clearly should have taken more note of it. Instead, I launched into a little bit of conversation, hoping to shift on to the next patient quite quickly. I asked her why she had been moving furniture and she started to tell me how she could not cope alone any more and had decided to move back in with this mother who did not seem to care for her. As she talked, I thought that she seemed to brighten up and I felt that I must be on a helpful track. I wonder now if I brightened up because I thought I was being helpful for this patient. We ran out of time and she agreed to come back the following week to discuss it all further. I was hoping after that to pass her on the counsellor and we might be able to sort something out that would prevent the recurrent visits.

I felt better in myself after the session. It felt like one of those times when the professional work is going well. Trisha even commented that I looked brighter. 'Yes', I said, 'I did some good work this morning with Marissa'. I wished I had not said that.

Marissa did come back, but she came back at a time when Geoff, the senior partner, was on. She said to Geoff that I had been asking her all sorts of questions about her family and that what she wanted was help for her shoulder. She said that the painkillers were no good – and she had known that at the time I had prescribed them - hence, I suppose, the comment that she had made. Geoff had another look at her shoulder and was not happy about it. He referred her for physiotherapy. And then he told me all about the session with her and I felt very responsible for my mistake. I did not say anything to Geoff about how I had been feeling that morning. It felt relevant but perhaps I should be superhuman. When I look back on this incident, I can see that there are things that I can learn from it. There are all sorts of intersecting issues and feelings tangled up in there. Life is so difficult sometimes.

Account 3

A particular incident in the surgery has bothered me. It concerns Marissa, a thirty year old woman who visits the surgery regularly for minor complaints (abdominal discomfort / headaches). She presented with a wrenched pain that was incurred when she was moving a bed in her mother's house. I diagnosed a muscular strain and prescribed painkillers. I suppose that I assumed that because it was Marissa, it was likely to be similar to her usual visits and that she may need little more than a placebo. She came back to the senior partner, Geoff, a few days later saying that I had not taken her shoulder seriously enough. He examined her and referred her for physiotherapy, as I can now see as appropriate management.

The event stirred up a lot of other things. The context was important. It was a January morning with the surgery full of worried well with 'flu's and the post-Christmas traumas. I came in tired and irritable because of family issues at home. Marissa was not on the list to start with. Trisha (our receptionist) added her because she judged that she needed to be seen that morning. Instead of taking note of Trisha's excellent judgement, I took this as a

usual visit. This was a cue that I missed. Trisha knows Marissa and knows her behaviour when she books an appointment. She recognised this as different. This is an aspect of the teamwork that we aspire to in the practice.

Marissa came in and I did look at her shoulder – but I know that I had already made a judgement about it before I examined her. This was Marissa, looking, as usual, pale and hunched – and I saw any symptom as an expression of her state and nothing else. My look at the shoulder was an irrelevant act in the circumstances. I think about the many discussions of how easy it is to get misled by preconceptions and there was I doing just that. I can see that I should have taken the shoulder more seriously. Marissa, herself, asked if the painkillers were all she needed. What would it have taken for Marissa to have said to me that I was on the wrong track that day, and to have brought my attention back to her shoulder? I wonder if she knew that I was feeling 'off' that day. I suppose I did respond to Marissa's persisting discontent by launching into questions about her family situation – in particular her relationship with her mother and why she was going back to live there – things that later Marissa said were irrelevant.

When I stand back now and think of the event like a film, I can see how I was wrong-footed when Marissa questioned the initial prescription and did not seem any happier as a result of getting it. I just grabbed at the story she had given me. When she seemed willing to talk more about her family, I turned it to my favour – seeing myself as 'obviously' being helpful. That day, I think I needed to feel successful. If I am utterly cynical, I would say that I used Marissa's situation to alter my mood. But then again, I suppose, that in turn might have helped the patients whom I saw after her that day.

I need to think, too, about Geoff's role in this and about my relationships with him and the rest of the team. I am the most junior and I tend to look up to them. I suppose I want to impress them. I could talk this one over with Steve, one of the other partners, he might see it all differently.

Account 4

I write about an incident that continues to disturb me. I have gone over it several times and my perspectives seem to change on it – so I talked it over with Steve (one of the other partners) to see how he saw it. The incident concerns Marissa, a thirty year old woman who visits the surgery frequently with various aches and pains (mostly tummyaches and headaches). The symptoms have never been serious, though she never looks well, nor does she seem happy. On this visit she presented with a wrenched shoulder which she said resulted from moving a bed. I did a brief examination and prescribed painkillers. There still seemed to be something bothering her so I engaged her in conversation about her family relationships (this arose from the circumstances of moving the bed). I thought she was responding well and we might be getting somewhere. Time ran out and I invited her to continue the conversation next week. I wanted to get her to a point where I could easily refer her to the practice counsellor. She agreed to come back - but came back to see Geoff,

the senior partner, still complaining about the shoulder. He gave her a more detailed examination and referred her for physiotherapy. He told me that she said that I thought that her family was the problem when it really was her shoulder.

I can see that the shoulder was a problem and I missed it and misconstrued the situation, engaging in the talk about her family. This was a multiple mistake. I did not pay attention to Trisha's judgement in adding Marissa to the list, I missed the shoulder problem itself when I examined it, but I also missed the cues that Marissa gave me when she was not happy with the prescription. But I was tired and out of sorts – not as sharp as I need to be when I am with patients. I am human, but I am a professional human and professionalism dictates that I should function well. I suppose that the problem was not so much that I missed one – or even two cues – then I could have put things right. I missed all three at the same time.

I then headed off on the wrong track – getting into the discussion that I assumed was relevant about her family. I think of a consultation with our local GP when I was 14. I did not agree with his diagnosis about my foot - he just said I should come back in four weeks if it was not better. I did not say anything then, though I knew in myself that it needed treatment. I ended up in plaster for six weeks. There is a power thing there. Looking at it from Marissa's point of view, she may have known that I was on the wrong track, but she probably would not have been able to do anything about it because I am a doctor. Someone like Marissa would not question a doctor's judgement at the time. How often were principles like this drummed into us at medical school – and yet it seems so easy to ignore them.

There is something more there too, though – this is what Steve suggested. That day, maybe I needed to feel helpful even more than usual – I needed more satisfaction from the situation so I was looking for cues from Marissa that suggested that she was pleased with me. I had to make do with the cue that suggested that she was no longer unhappy and I suppose I made up the rest – thinking that the conversation about her family was helpful. Maybe I can be more self critical when I am in a better mood and less tired. Maybe I need less and can give more then.

It is possible, of course, that the conversation was not wrong in general, but wrong for that time. It may be helpful to her in the longer term – I just need to wait and handle the situation more mindfully when she comes back.

I can see that there are lots more issues in this – for example, I need to consider why I was so disturbed by the incident. I know I made a mistake, but I think if it had been Steve whom Marissa had consulted, I would not have been so bothered. It was worse because it was Geoff. Steve would have mentioned it and laughed. Once we have discounted serious symptoms it is not unusual to rely on patients returning quite quickly if they feel that a symptom is not disappearing in response to initial treatment. Geoff preached a bit and I responded by getting into my 'I am only junior' mode.

So what have I learnt?

- I am apt to see things differently when I am tired.

- I should pay attention to Trisha's judgements. She is the point of first contact and is pretty experienced in perceiving a patient's needs.
- I should be more aware about the power issues and how they silence patients. Maybe there are ways in which I can deal with this better. I will think on this.
- It was really useful talking the matter through with Steve. Hearing what I said to him enabled me to get it better into perspective and to see the issues in different ways.
-Etc etc etc (more issues listed).

