How to engage in reflective practice

Developing the reflective practitioner within

Engaging with professional learning is essential for maintaining our competence for the benefit of the client, ourselves and the firm. One way of doing this is through reflective practice.

The main difference between private, personal reflection and formalised ‘reflective practice’ as a tool for learning is providing evidence of the reflection and activating it within the bounds of your professional context.

At the heart of the CPD scheme is a lawyer’s continuing professional development plan and record (CPDPR). The CPDPR is where each practitioner takes personal responsibility for documenting their learning and how it related to their initial professional development goals.

However, it is not just a record of what was learnt but why this learning was worth engaging in and, most importantly, what will be done with it.

Over the last few months I’ve engaged with many lawyers, especially in supporting the development of reflective practice and how to get the best out of reflection for the purposes of documenting the CPDPR and for growing professionally.

While many lawyers are well on their way to applying a deep understanding of the benefits of reflective practice for their own learning, a greater number could benefit from developing this professional tool further.

What is reflective practice?

Simply put, reflective practice is about thinking about the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of learning activities and the action to take as a result.

We can view the reflective practitioner as having developed this into four discrete stages. The ability to:

- assimilate new learning;
- relate it to what they already know;
- adapt it for their own purposes; and
- transform thought into action.

Engaging in reflective practice for your CPDPR requires setting aside time. This of course is easier said than done. However, we invest time to better our clients’ prospects and we should do the same for ourselves. Reflective practice is valuable as it is suggested that, over time, those who use this technique tend to develop greater levels of creativity, critical thinking skills and metacognitive ability – that is, their ability to think about their own thinking – and become more valuable employees and practitioners as a result.

The first stage is to examine what you learnt and think about how this fits within the context of your professional life. This examination can be at many levels: your specialist technical knowledge; your role within your workplace; or against a backdrop of your career to date and you as a professional.
Finding out what was valuable and, what wasn’t, is the important next step. When you complete your learning reflections don’t just notate what you gained from the activity or what was positive, but also consider reflecting on what you didn’t know, what gaps became apparent in your practice and, the most important question to pose, against all of your reflections, is _why_.

The third phase is now thinking your way through what this learning could be useful for. Could the learning be: developed further; utilised in your own practice; added it to existing structures; or did it highlight firm activities that are no longer viewed as best practice?

Now that you’ve thought about all of this, it’s time to take action. Again, this can be realised in many different ways. But this stage is a future focused one.

**Types of Reflective Statements**

As discussed being reflective in a professional context is as much about looking forward as it is about looking back. Equally, reflection about your learning can also be viewed more broadly than just what the learning means to what you will do. You can also be reflective on how the new learning makes you feel, how it impacts on others and what it might mean for future planning for the profession. As we work in a people orientated environment these kind of reflections are very important.

Below are four different approaches to forming reflective statements:

**Retrospective**

“I realise that I was not always recognising this within my firm…”

“I now appreciate that I didn’t really understand how to apply…”

**Inward and outward looking**

“This course confirmed that I don’t feel comfortable with…”

“My team would benefit from looking at this because…”

“I noticed at the courses that others on my table employed a different technique that was more efficient…”

**Future focused**

“Next time I come across a case like this I will…”

“In light of this learning I’m going to invest in more training because…”
“Strategically we'll need to place our energy into...”

“I will now work to develop a more robust...”

In many senses reflective practice almost becomes like a mini goal setting exercise where you decide what you will now do with this knowledge. A reflective practitioner is continually looking for getting the best value out of professional learning opportunities.

**Leading reflectively**

As a leader developing reflective practice techniques can be of benefit to your firm. Many appraisal management systems and business self-review models take a reflective approach to goal assessment. In fact reflective techniques can be a powerful tool to help with a range of business decisions, including:

- appraisal discussions;
- resource allocation to support learning;
- identifying and promoting the unique position of the firm; and
- ensuring that their practice stays competitive.

In understanding how to engage in reflective practice we create an opportunity to continually improve our competence through learning. This benefits not only our own self-esteem as a professional but the profession itself and, importantly, the experience of the client. Why would we not think about that?

For more on how to engage in reflective practice, see the resources at [www.lawsociety.org.nz/CPD](http://www.lawsociety.org.nz/CPD) or feel free to contact Ken Trass at: [Ken.Trass@lawsociety.org.nz](mailto:Ken.Trass@lawsociety.org.nz)

Ken Trass is the NZLS Professional Development Manager