

Refl' Action

The meaning and value of reflection: finding a common definition

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The project has received funding from the European Union's programme **Erasmus+** under **Grant Agreement** 2021-1-FR02-KA210-YOU-000031035. This article reflects only the author's view and the Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of information it contains.

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Introduction: what reflection means to us and its role within experiential learning

In this article, we will analyze the meaning of reflection in the context of experiential learning. We will follow the history of reflection in the theories of Dewey, Kolb, Shon, and we will create connections with the most ancient meaning of the term, from ancient Greek philosophy. Reflection arises as a human activity necessary for a better understanding of oneself, both as an individual and as a member of a community. In this work, we will underline the importance of reflective practice in history and how reflection has now become an efficient and useful tool both for education and for everyone's daily life. In the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and in the theories of experiential learning, reflection is presented as a specific practice that follows a certain path. The steps of this path will be analyzed and compared to each other to create a new definition that can be used for common terminology and our work. For this aim, in the first article we will analyze:

- The five levels of Dewey's reflective path
- The cycles of experiential learning in Kolb and Shon
- The canons of Hellenistic philosophies and meaning of reflection in Plato and Aristotle
- Interesting insights from contemporary philosophers

At the end of the article, we will give our definition of reflection, created by the authors, plus the personal definitions shared by the organizations in the preparatory meeting. We will also use this definition in future articles, enriching it from time to time through other theories and personal experiences.

From ancient Greece to experiential learning: a journey through the meaning of reflection

It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of; but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate, it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.¹
Socrates

The concept of reflection has very ancient roots, the term comes from the Latin **reflexio** -onis, literally translatable as "**folding**". Even earlier the Greeks used the term **διάνοια** "thought, reflection", composed of **διὰ** "**through**" and **νοῦς** "**intelligence** or intellect" to refer to a form of thought considered, healthy and correct. Still, the Greeks used to refer to knowledge with the term **οἶδα**, literally "I know" because is the past form of the verb ὁράω, "I see". Usually, when we talk about reflection we consider it like a deep thought that returns in the mind again and again. The etymology of the Latin term precisely **underlines this "return" aspect**.

Imagine having to put a blanket back in a drawer, or a sleeping bag in its bag. Nobody tells us that it is right to fold the blanket to put it in place, we could take it like this, without making it smaller, more compact, more manageable. It might be fine to get into a large, empty closet. One day, however, we may find ourselves having to put in place another blanket and so on. Gradually, we would be forced to take the blankets back, to fold them in equal parts, to make room for the others and to put them in order. This metaphor highlights the indisputable link between reflection and experience. A thought, an emotion or behaviour that has not been elaborated looks like a messy blanket, an experience devoid of reflection. They take up more space, they are less manageable, we don't know where to put them to make room for others.

The Greek etymology of the term also emphasizes some useful features. **Dianoia** for the ancient Greeks was a form of **conscious knowledge**, in contrast to opinion, a thought devoid of reflection and awareness, in simple words superficial. On the contrary, the term dianoia formed by the union of "**dià**" and "**noῦς**" indicates a form of **knowledge based on movement**, thus a **process**. Dianoia is therefore a form of dynamic knowledge, not immobile, but characterized by movement. At the same time, the Greeks used the term oida which refers to knowledge that has been obtained through the senses, seeing, and the physical presence of the individual. I know because

¹ Plato, *Apology of Socrates in The Dialogues of Plato* Translated by Jowett, Benjamin, 1924, Oxford University Press, American branch.

I have seen. It, as a consequence, emphasizes the link between a skill that we could define as intellectual or mental, and sensory, sight.

In Plato², human knowledge is identified with something not reachable. The extremely simplified Platonic vision of the world is based on two main concepts: ideas, which correspond to truth, reality, what is "right and good", and things, repetitive and imperfect images of real principles, of ideas. The whole world to which men belong is nothing else than imitation, the imperfect copy of the supreme principle, the idea of good. It follows that the knowledge possible for the human being is something imperfect, destined to be forever incomplete. One could think of a sort of negative, passive vision of the human being. What Plato emphasizes, and which will be taken up by numerous philosophers and scientists in the following centuries, is the impossibility of considering human knowledge as something finite, immobile, and definitive. So, the Humans, philosophers for Plato, can only have incomplete knowledge, forever. **Knowledge** is therefore not a thing, a *quid*, but on the contrary, it **is a process**, a *dianoia*, something that goes through and is crossed by numerous factors. It is a question that precedes it, that continues it, that allows its very existence. Aristotle³, moving away from his master's footprints, identifies the vital principle of the world not in the Platonic idea of good, but in the principle of movement. The substance of each element of reality is alive because it is crossed by motion.

Philosophy for the ancient Greeks is something specifically practical. During the expansion of Alexander the Great, in the Hellenic period, philosophical reflection became the best tool for the development of the individual's well-being. The purpose of philosophy is no longer to discover the fundamental truths but to allow the individual to be happy and to live well⁴. In Pierre Hadot⁵, we find several Hellenic canons. We report a list of common elements, useful for a comparison with the steps that you will find below in Dewey and Kolb.

- Research
- Deep examination
- Reading, listening and attention - the memory of what is good
- Meditation and self-control through the therapy of the passions

² To go further about Platonic theories, refer to *Thinking, Knowing, Acting: Epistemology and Ethics in Plato and Ancient Platonism (Brill's Plato Studies)* by M. Bonazzi

³ To go further about Aristotle, refer to B. Russell, *A history of western philosophy*, Simon and Schuster, 1972.

⁴ Refer to P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited with an Introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Michael Chase, Oxford/Cambridge, Massachusetts, Basil Blackwell, 1995, Oxford, Blackwell's, 1995

⁵ *Ibidem*

- The indifference towards what cannot be changed
- The fulfilment of duties

Several moments listed in the **Hellenic canons** will return in the **theories of experiential learning**. In the book **How We Think**⁶, Jhon Dewey speaks about reflective thinking as the mental retreat on a subject and addressing it with serious and continuous consideration⁷. According to Dewey, **reflection arises from an individual's need to resolve a state of doubt**, and therefore from the presence of a problematic situation. Reflection is, in Dewey, what will lead the subject to the dissolution of this doubt. The need to resolve the doubt is the cause that will guide the reflective process. At the same time, it will be the nature of the problem that sets the goal of thought and controls its process.

According to Dewey, the reflective process moves through some phases which do not constitute rigid rules or categories of reference, but rather the “stages” through which the process develops until a solution is reached. We must not understand this process as finite. **Every reflection** is placed in Dewey **as the starting point of a subsequent reflection** but referring to the theoretical line of pragmatism in Dewey, the reflective process is configured as a spontaneous need in human beings that arises from the identification of a problematic situation and therefore aims at resolving it.

The stages to which we refer are five:

1. Suggestions
2. Intellectual transformation of the difficulties encountered into a possible problem to be solved
3. The use of suggestions as guidelines (therefore as a hypothesis)
4. The mental elaboration of the idea
5. The control is through direct action or imagination. These are the two main ways of controlling reflection. Somehow Dewey seems to give more value to the proof

⁶ John Dewey, a pragmatist philosopher who lived between the ninth and twentieth centuries is considered the founder of experiential learning. His theories have been widely taken up both in the academic and in the pedagogical psychological field and used as input for the development of different teaching and/or learning methodologies. For further information, please refer to <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED481922>

⁷ Refer to the second chapter of *How we think*, John Dewey, D.C. Heath & Company, Boston, 1910

of direct action, while emphasizing that is not always possible, this hypothesis of impossibility highlights the need to add imagination.

David Kolb⁸, professor of Social Psychology at Harvard University proposes an idea of **experiential learning** based on the identification of four **different learning styles** – diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating⁹. According to Kolb, experiential learning¹⁰ is based on the **acquisition and transformation of experience**. These two steps move in a path of 4 steps:

- Concrete experience
- Observation and reflection about the experience
- The analysis, like a formation of abstract concepts and conclusions, like a generalization
- Test a hypothesis in future situations, start a new experience

Compared to Dewey's approach, Kolb's focuses more on the **external inputs necessary for the development of reflection**. According to Kolb, it is not possible to develop reflection simply because one has lived a certain experience. On the contrary, there must be tools, specifically designed for the development of the observation and reflection phase. These tools are identifiable with **guiding questions and inputs from outside**. It is, therefore, necessary to consider that real experiential learning, conveyed by the reflective moment, occurs only when the right attention is paid to the reference context, the necessary circumstances and, where the learning context includes it, in the presence of **a figure who facilitates the reflective process**, through guiding questions that are thought both concerning the characteristics of the subject that will have to reflect - age, personality, life experiences, etc. - and to the type of reflection that one wants to help to develop.

In the 90s, theories on experiential learning were enhanced by the studies¹¹ of **D. Shon** and the figure he defines as "**the reflective professional**¹²". In his studies, Shon states that technical-scientific skills are no longer sufficient to develop effectively efficient professionals in their roles. The figure of the reflective professional is configured as a competent personality in his sector, where the technical skills are neither excluded nor

⁸ David Allen Kolb, born in 1939 in Moline, Illinois, is a theorist of experiential learning, individual and social change, career development, and executive and professional education.

⁹ Kolb styles of learning will be explored in the next publications. To go further about it, please refer to <https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/reflectivewriting/kolb>

¹⁰ D. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1984

¹¹ Donald Shon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*, London: Temple Smith, 1983.

¹² *Ibidem*

underestimated but simply not considered sufficient. Shon considers the reflective process as it is **always** there **in the actions of professionals**. This process helps them to better perform their tasks, achieve their goals in a conscious and non-passive way and to create and maintain more functional and useful working relationships. Furthermore, in the process proposed by Shon, reflection is no longer configured as a partial moment of individuals' learning and growth process, but as a constant process contemporary with action. This is not an isolated moment, but something that accompanies the entire learning process. Therefore, it is no longer the action to convey reflection, but the opposite; **the constant state of reflection leads to the fulfilment of new actions**, which in return lead to the creation of new considerations for future experiences. So the cycle proposed by Shon can be summarized as follows:

- Consideration
- Action
- New consideration

If we return to the definition of reflection proposed by Dewey, his successors and the references to the two Greek philosophers, we can identify some key elements in the concept of reflection. The first is the **presence of doubt**. One can mistakenly think that a good reflection, "a good thought", is that of the person who expresses it more confidently, who defines it as conclusive and finished. The cited authors show how, on the contrary, a reflexive process is defined as such only when it starts from the **awareness of ignorance**, from doubt, from the lack of certainty. Subsequently, the reference to motion in Aristotle helps us to underline the **procedural dimension of reflection**. Dewey rightly points out that in the educational field there is a tendency to think, superficially, of the best answer as the one that comes first. As if it were an illumination coming from above. Considering reflection as its procedural and dynamic character leads us to read it as something that first needs an admission of non-knowledge and secondly the need for time and certain tools to be completed. It is also necessary to pay attention to that process even when a problematic situation is dissolved and the doubt that caused it is resolved, the result of the process will not be considered as definitive, but as a **new beginning**, from which to give rise to a further reflection. The cognitive process has no end, from the point of view of its definition.

It may be useful for us to refer to the Hegelian¹³ vision of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, terms with which Hegel defines a continuous movement at the basis of the whole. The thesis is proposed as a starting hypothesis, the antithesis as the opposite of the thesis and the synthesis as the clash/meeting of the first two terms. In Hegel, the

¹³ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Peter Fuss and John Dobbins, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019

synthesis will always resolve itself as a new thesis, through a cyclic movement of attaining absolute knowledge. Another term derived from the ancient Greeks can help us understand an extremely important aspect of the reflective process - what Hegel calls antithesis and which Dewey presents as conflicting suppositions - the **διάλογος**, dialogue. Dialogue in ancient Greece is configured as the educational form par excellence, interpreted by the authors differently, it is also confirmed by contemporary¹⁴ theories as an extremely efficient cognitive tool. When Dewey describes the state of doubt as a necessary condition to start a reflection, he is underlining the need for **internal dialogue within the individual**. This happens because while facing a problematic situation we can ask ourselves questions, suggest hypotheses and make them dialogue with each other, and with the reference context in which we reflect.

A final point that may be of interest to us is in the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian philosopher of the early twentieth century who devoted much of his life to try to understand human knowledge. It is interesting to note that in the first part of his research, Wittgenstein considers logic as the starting point of every form of knowledge, but he radically changes his mind in his subsequent writings. What the philosopher will highlight with his research is that human knowledge cannot be thought of solely concerning the logical form because the content of the life of every human being - therefore his **experiences** - also inevitably influence how he knows and interprets the world. A very interesting aspect of Wittgenstein's theories concerns the **"language game"** concept. With these terms the author refers to the idea that every word, phrase, thought of the human being must always refer to the context in which it was expressed, or thought, to be able to understand it sincerely. It is a theory very close to the ideas of experiential education because the reference to the context, to the specific experience and above all to the experiential background of each individual is fundamental for the development of a correct reflection and understanding of the facts.

¹⁴ To go further please refer to Hans Georg Gadamer third part of *Truth and Method*, 1st English ed., trans. by W, Glen-Doepel, ed. by John Cumming and Garret Barden, 1975.

First steps of our journey

We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size.¹⁵

John of Salisbury

The quote above is commonly attributed to Bernard of Chartres¹⁶ by John of Salisbury. With this metaphor, the medieval philosopher referred to the great authors who had preceded him. To the greatness of past thought, he attributed the magnificence of the discoveries and human knowledge of his century. In this article we have tried to highlight the value that the concept of reflection has in our lives today, also thanks to the authors and human beings who have recognized, applied and made it grow in history. From the theories reported in the previous chapter we can generalize our definition of the concept of reflection, this is not configured as a purely mental action, but as something concretely linked to the practical, daily and working life of each individual. A dynamic and constantly evolving process, closely linked to the characteristics of individuals and the contexts in which they find themselves.

The theories on experiential learning inaugurated by Dewey and expanded by Kolb and Shon bring to light the ancient value given to reflection, already presented in the most ancient cultures. The value of the reflective process within educational theories becomes wider when considered as a value for the daily life of everyone. Reflection, as a specific tool of the human being, is a resource that can be used not only in the educational field but in everyday life too. Shon shows how it should be considered a tool of great importance also in the working world. The ancient philosophies instead show how the development of reflective thought is at the basis of the well-being of individuals, even simply in their daily life. Below is a general definition of the concept of reflection that has been developed using the sources cited in this article. Starting from this definition, we decided to expand it through different points of view collected by each of the organizations collaborating in the project.

At first, we thought of **reflection as a human activity**, which arises from the awareness of not having all the answers (like an **admission of ignorance**). Its purpose is to dissolve the doubts from which it arises (**starting from a state of doubt**). It is a process, **closely**

¹⁵ John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon* (1159) bk. 3, ch. 4, quoted in R. K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants* ch. 9, 1965.

¹⁶ Bernard of Chartres was a medieval philosopher and grammarian who lived in France around the 1130. In this work we mention him to refer to his attitude of humility and respect towards his previous studies.

linked to the characteristics of the individual and the context of reference (that is the nature of the reflection). **Each reflection is a starting point for the next one**, it is not a final process, but a cyclical path.

From the different sharing moments, an idea of the reflective process emerges as a **tool for observing reality**, which supports the individual in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. A tool that **helps to focus on the objectives**, to have a **clearer vision of contexts and dynamics** which can be facilitated by certain contexts or specific actions, strictly connected with the subjects that reflect - for example, walks in nature, sports, moments dedicated only to oneself, an interruption of daily activity- to reorganize inputs, thoughts, emotions and duties. Also, the idea of **finding specific moments during the day to reflective thinking** strongly helps to create a healthy and **reflective habit**.

From these premises, we want to begin our journey to discover the reflective process because we firmly believe that for too long the intellectual and the practices qualities of the human being have been erroneously read in contradiction to each other, underestimating how they are, on the contrary, always connected, growing and supporting each other. Therefore, we speak of the reflective process as an action, a choice of the individual who recognizes in himself the ability to act, thanks to his thought and his ability to think, and thanks to his actions and experiences.



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Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1975

John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 1938

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Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, 1995

Plato, *Apology of Socrates in The Dialogues of Plato*, 1924

Useful links

<https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/reflectivewriting/kolb> Simple summary of Kolb's experiential cycle

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jon-Ord-2/publication/270338098_John_Dewey_and_Experiential_Learning_Developing_the_theory_of_youth_work/links/54a7c6010cf267bdb90a3779/John-Dewey-and-Experiential-Learning-Developing-the-theory-of-youth-work.pdf John Dewey and Experiential Learning: Developing the theory of youth work

<http://www.kamaleonte.org/wp-content/uploads/REFLECT-Holding-the-space.pdf> A useful manual on reflection, published by Kamaleonte for the European project "*Reflection as a core transferable competence in higher education and adult education*" (REFLECT)