

# The Experiential Learning Portfolio (ELP) – A Key Tool in Developing Reflective Practice

## Background

In the 1990's, concerns expressed by Government regarding the 'competence' of newly qualified Environmental Health Officers, led to the qualification process becoming increasingly prescriptive with students being required to complete:

- a) A core-curriculum – the accredited degree programme;
- b) A prescribed set of 'experiences' during their practical training - the Practical Training Logbook;
- c) An assessment of the integration between theory and practice that had occurred at the completion of the student's education and practical training – the Professional Examination.

Whilst this process restored the confidence of Government in the competence of EHOs, the measures were subjected to criticism. Not least of the critics were some environmental health academics who, whilst acknowledging that the Logbook ensured that all newly qualified EHOs undertook a consistent programme of training, worried that the CIEH had created a 'learning experience' that was two-dimensional (practitioners showed and students watched and repeated). The same colleagues worried that the CIEH process (particularly the Logbook element) could lead to the growth of a *"just tell me what to do and I'll do it"* culture within the profession and might be party to significant deskilling.

Consequently, when reviewing the qualification process in late 2002/3, two issues were at the forefront for the CIEH; namely:

- a) The need to ensure that the qualification process produced practitioners (EHPs not EHOs) who were 'fit for purpose' in a wide variety of work environments;
- b) The need to ensure that EHPs complete the qualification process with knowledge, understanding and a range of skills that support them as professionals and ensure that they are 'life-long learners'.

Today, the profession has largely achieved these objectives. However, the reality for student EHPs, studying under Curriculum 2003 (irrespective of whether they realise this or not!), is that the ELP requires them to develop into reflective learners as a prelude to becoming reflective practitioners upon qualification.

Significantly, for the wider profession who may have limited or no experience of ELP, three questions have emerged from this change:

- **What** is reflective learning/practice?
- **Why** does it matter?
- **Who** needs to be involved?

## What is Reflective Learning / Practice?

To answer the question, it is first worth considering what we mean by 'learning'.

Little is known about how people learn, although there are lots of theories; so it's perhaps easiest to define learning "after the event" by asking how you know whether learning has taken place? Learning has taken place, when you know something which you did not know before and can show it and / or you are able to do something which you weren't able to do before. In both cases proof is required. Thinking that you know or can do something is not enough; you must be able to show that you know it or are able to do it.

So how does this view of learning fit within the available models? One of the most enduring of theoretical models for adult learning has proved to be that developed by David Kolb in 1984<sup>1</sup>, although he readily acknowledged a significant debt to the earlier work of Kurt Lewin<sup>2</sup>. In Kolb's model, learning is presented as a cycle:

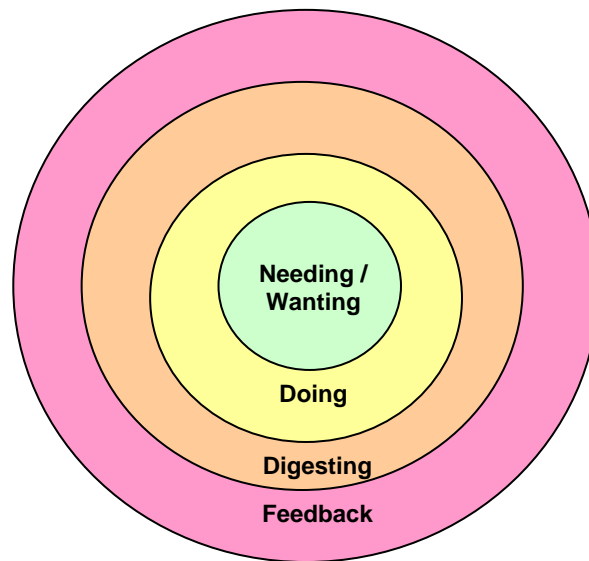


Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984)

Kolb's suggests that there are four stages which should follow from each other: **Experience** is followed by personal **Observation** on that experience – incorporating some system of formal evidence gathering. This may then be followed by **Reflection** and the derivation of general rules describing the experience, or the application of known theories to it and, hence, to the construction of ways of modifying the next occurrence of the experience - **Planning**, leading in turn to the next **Experience**. Kolb postulates that this may happen in a second or two or over a longer period, depending on the subject.

Hypothetically within this cycle, a learner consciously moves through every stage in every learning situation; however, practical experience shows that learners are not equally at home at all stages of the cycle. Many show preferences for one or more of the stages and sometimes positive dislike of others, with complex reasons underpinning the likes and dislikes. However, the exclusion of any part of the cycle results in incomplete learning.

A powerful and more up to date theory of learning is that postulated by Phil Race in two publications between 2001<sup>3</sup> and 2005<sup>4</sup>. Race is rather dismissive of Kolb and sees learning not as a cycle but as a series of concentric rings, rather like ripples on a pond:



Race sees the process as beginning with the **Need** to learn and the associated desire (**Want**) of the individual student or practitioner to learn; this is then followed by active engagement of the individual in real practice – **Doing**. Race is a firm believer in Einstein's view that '*Knowledge is experience and everything else is just information*' and postulates that, having engaged in practice, the student / practitioner needs to make sense of the experience and "*get their head around it*" – Race refers to this as **Digestion** and suggests that this is closely followed by the need for **Feedback** to be given by a third party to the learning situation.

Irrespective of the model of learning that ultimately dominates, the requirement for reflection, or 'digestion' as Race describes it, is key to effective learning. Indeed, Donald Schön (1983)<sup>5</sup> suggested that the capacity to reflect on action, so as to engage in a process of continuous learning, is one of the defining characteristics of professional practice. So profound has the work of Schön become regarded, that the cultivation of the capacity to reflect **in** action (while doing something) and **on** action (after you have done it), has become an important feature of professional education programmes in many disciplines throughout the world.

## Why does it matter?

The work of Schön and others sees the reflective learner / practitioner as someone who explores their own experiences of learning, through a questioning approach, to better understand how they learn and with a view to improving their further learning. Indeed, as Schön observed, this reflective approach is a key facet of the modern professional and contrasts with more traditional types of learning such as learning by rote which is often arbitrary, verbatim, unrelated to experience and encompasses no on-going commitment to relate new knowledge to prior learning.

The CIEH has recognised that in moving from rote learning to reflective learning, there is a real danger that the explanation that is necessary for students, who may or may not have

any prior knowledge of the reflective learning process, runs the risk of undermining the whole process. CIEH has, therefore, utilised a range of strategies to encourage reflection and learning without providing a template to be followed because, by definition, the use of systems, templates and rules count against reflective learning being undertaken. This is why CIEH has developed a skeletal ELP that requires the student to engage in a constructive learning process that follows the Kolb model.

At the heart of this process is the requirement for the student to continually question and adopt a reflective approach to learning via the completion of a reflective learning portfolio; this fulfils several functions:

- It allows analysis of an individual's experiences and facilitates learning from this experience,
- It encourages critical thinking, a questioning attitude and leads potentially to greater learner autonomy,
- It promotes professional competence by encouraging the recognition of mistakes and weaknesses,
- When documented, it provides written proof of an individual's progression in thinking and deeper understanding for use in practice and to enhance employability,
- It has the added value of promoting an adult learning and practice model which is what the CIEH and other professions aspire to.

Keeping a portfolio and writing reflectively can seem threatening; particularly since there is no right or wrong way to complete the task and portfolio completion is, itself, a learning experience and skill development vehicle! However, once grasped, writing reflectively may simply involve a couple of sides of paper, completed at an appropriate point in the intervention, and need only take a few minutes to complete. The benefit of a structured approach like this is that students are constantly reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses and planning for change.

So, addressing the question of why this all matters is very simple - it matters because it improves professional performance and assists in generating an evidence base to environmental health work. More significantly, unless as a group of practitioners, we are able to fully engage in reflective practice, we cannot consider ourselves collectively to be a profession or ourselves, as individuals, to be professional!

## Who needs to be involved?

Is reflective learning / practice just for students - No! The principles should be taken on board by all members of the profession; indeed, the opportunity to do so has existed for a number of years in the form of the compulsory Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the voluntary Assessment of Professional Competence schemes that were instigated in the 1990's. Both schemes provide a forum for reflection, although the current CPD scheme does not overtly reward reflective practice over and above simple recoding of professional development activity.

Irrespective of the mature practitioner's decision to engage in reflective practice, one thing is clear; anyone who works with a student who is completing ELP, has a duty to assist that student and to facilitate their reflective practice. Encouragement is a particularly important aspect of the role of the mentor / supervisor of the student professional. Indeed, it can be argued that "real" reflective practice needs a second person to act as mentor and ask

appropriate questions to ensure that the reflection goes somewhere, and does not get bogged down in self-justification, self-indulgence or self-pity!

## In Summary

Whilst the theory of reflective practice is not new, its involvement in environmental health education is an innovation which, whilst seeming threatening to some, has clear advantages which many other professions across the world have already discovered. Perhaps the biggest challenge is for all members of the profession to create the necessary time to make sure that reflection is meaningful. After all, the benefit, associated with it becoming embedded in environmental health practice is not only improved performance, but the opportunity to really consider ourselves to be professionals.

### References:

- 1 KOLB D A (1984) *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development* USA: Prentice-Hall
- 2 LEWIN K (1942) "Field Theory and Learning" in D Cartwright (ed.) *Field Theory in Social Science: selected theoretical papers*, London; Social Science Paperbacks, 1951
- 3 Phil Race 'The Lecturer's Toolkit: 2nd edition' Routledge, London, 2001
- 4 Phil Race 'Making learning happen' (2005, Sage, London),
- 5 Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, London: Temple Smith.