

Experiential Learning Vignette 6: Embedding Reflection and Reflective Practice across a programme

This vignette is based on discussions with Constantinos Choromides, Brian Smith and Colin Wilson at Glasgow Caledonian University. It forms part of a [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) funded by the QAA.

Embedding Reflective Practice from start to finish

The suite of Railway Operations Management (ROM) Work-Based Learning (WBL) programmes delivered by Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) and the Chartered Institution of Railway Operators (CIRO) offers working railway personnel a route to gain a railway-specific academic qualification. Applicants and students come from a range of backgrounds and come with rich experiences and learning—in the railway and from previous careers.

Reflection and reflective practice are embedded throughout the curriculum design:

1. Before – by reflecting on experiential learning to gain entry to the programme: Applicants have a range of professional expertise, from those just starting out in their professional careers post-school, to those with years of experience, or for whom the railway is not their first career. Education should be inclusive and give opportunity, so for this programme [Recognition of Prior \(informal\) Learning \(RPiL\)](#) is used as part of the applications process.

Applicants can detail their experiential learning using a structured pro-forma that asks them to reflect on their prior learning against the programme curricula, thereby highlighting where they can evidence prior knowledge.

Thousands of applicants have gained entry onto the programmes and gained a Higher Education Railway Operations qualification, that is respected within the Railway industry.

This [video on Recognition of Prior \(informal\) Learning in the ROM programme](#) explains more.

2. Professing reflective practice foundations through curricula: At each level of the programme, the first module to be studied is a Personal and Professional Development (PPD) module. Reflection and reflective practice models are introduced and are applied to support development of meta-skills, e.g. moving from reflecting

Reflection and reflective practice as a curriculum tenet

Reflection is a core tenet of work-based learning (WBL) ([Helyer, 2015](#)), whereby students make sense of learning in context, whether they are seeking to resolve differences between theory and their experiences, having a Eureka moment as they understand why something happens, or whether it challenges their assumptions.

Reflection is multi-faceted so what are some of the aspects the project has highlighted to consider within curriculum design:

- **Recognise experiential learning on an ongoing basis**: The ROM example shows how experiential learning is used on application. In Degree Apprenticeships Skills Scans are required every year to reflect ongoing workplace learning.
- **Reflection is not just “on-demand”**: Opportunities for learning from experiences happen at different times. So the use of ongoing mechanisms, e.g. log-books, mentor sessions allows these to be captured along with more structured reflections at key moments in modules. The ROM example here shows reflection is embedded throughout and in different ways (ongoing through tutors, at key moments)
- **Recognise reflection for different purposes**: it could be in-action (more muscle memory), on-action (making sense of experience) or for-action (learning for future action).

Helyer, R. (2015), "Learning through reflection: the critical role of reflection in work-based learning (WBL)", *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 15-27.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-10-2015-003>

Enabling diverse forms of reflection and reflective practice

This project has highlighted that there are different ways to use reflection and reflective practice to bring out learning from experiences.

Introduce models to help structure:

There are existing reflective models (most are 'Critical Incident' models, so learning from a key experience) that if introduced appropriately by staff can help support students reflection. Focus groups comments highlighted that students need interaction with experienced "reflectors" to produce the best written reflections.

Allow different forms of reflection:

written reflection can be difficult, as is structured. Discussions highlighted the key role that conversation and dialogue can have – either between students (peer learning and feedback) or through interactions with staff (mentors and tutors that have been suitably trained to support this). Forms could include Structured Discussions, Learning Sets, talking heads (and not just a written reflection).

Provide applied training to students and staff: don't assume that someone can reflect (or facilitate reflection). Training and repeated practice are important to master this important lifelong learning competency.

Make it count: reflection takes effort, so any reflective practice should encourage students to better understand themselves and their organisational context. Use of dialogue (conversation or written feedback and feedforward) can make a difference

about self at Level 1, to self and teams at Level 3 (Degree level), to considering future self at Masters level.

At lower levels, reflective models (e.g., Gibbs, 1998, and [Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001](#)) are introduced, as they can support students to more fully explore learning from their experiences, particularly considering one's emotions. At higher levels, deeper evaluation, and connecting with external perspective to challenge assumptions are encouraged, thereby developing greater self-awareness (and double and triple-loop learning, e.g. see [Donohoe, 2023](#)).

Further idea from [QAA work on Reflective learning for PPD](#).

3. Making sense of experiences throughout programme: As working professionals, students have access to previous and ongoing experiences and through the railway operations specific modules that they study, an important aspect is to encourage students to reflect on how what is being introduced through formal learning relates to their lived experiences. This reflection on experience is achieved in different ways – through written reflection using a recognised reflective model, use of tutors as sounding boards for students, and students self-forming their own peer-learning groups. These approaches allow students to make clearer connections and offer the potential to question why things are happening (going beyond single-loop learning).

4. Reflecting on personal growth at the end of each level: students undertake a work-based project at the end of each level. This project is self-selected based on observation and experience within their workplace (so based on observation). After students have completed their investigation, they will have new knowledge and insights, and reflecting on the significance of this learning (and also about generating new knowledge through the research process) is again encouraging self-awareness within the students. Moreover, they can reflect on their overall growth across the level.

For students in levels 2 and 3 they present these reflections and these are typically rich with emotions and feelings, enhanced self-awareness and a recognition of how they have developed. And the ability to discuss these insights individually with the student often brings a far richer reflection than a written reflection.