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Models of Reflection



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The use of reflection to improve practice^{1,2} is an aspect of one's continuing competence. Given the way reflection guides the self-assessment of learning needs, it is important to understand reflection in more depth. Mezirow described three kinds of reflection: (a) content, (b) process, and (c) premise.³ This article focuses on the types of reflection and their importance to transformative learning, where the learner questions the status quo and underlying assumptions and reaches a higher level of understanding a particular phenomenon.

Reflecting on content involves thinking about ways to describe a particular vexing problem in practice. A reflective content question might be: "What do I know?" Reflecting on process occurs when trying to determine a method of problem solving. A reflective process question might be: If I am to be an effective practitioner, how do I know my method of problem solving works? Reflecting on premise leads to deeper thinking about the factors or theories upon which the problem is predicated. Reflective premise questions might be: Why does it matter that I attend to this problem? Does it matter that I chose this problem to guide my continuing competence? Is there an alternative?

Encouraging occupational therapy practitioners to use their professional development portfolios simply to record their reflections on practice appears to be deceptively simple. Reflection enhances continuing competence and superior client outcomes only when the results of reflection are valid. If the goal of reflection is to improve practice, practitioners must learn how to engage in process and premise reflection, rather than limiting their reflection to the content type.³ Given occupational therapy practitioners' need to deepen their reflection, what kind of learning takes place once one has used a deeper mode of reflection?

Mezirow described instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory learning. Instrumental learning relies on hypothesis testing, or deductive learning.³ Communicative learning involves reaching a common understanding or consensus among a community of practitioners. In communicative learning, there is no attempt to determine why a particular norm is established. Emancipatory learning involves a critical analysis of how norms and conditions have been derived. Process and premise reflection lead to all three modes of learning. Because content reflection is a remembering of what one already knows, it does not promote learning.⁴

A reflection on practice might start with content reflection, where the purpose is to describe the problem or to make explicit what one knows (e.g., What are the goals of my intervention for my client?). The problem needing solving is clarification of the intervention goals. A habitual response to this problem might be: "I want to encourage client collaboration in developing intervention goals, ones that lead to improved occupational performance and community participation." If reflection stops here, the practitioner will not learn anything new about his or her practice.

The practitioner needs to move to a deeper level of reflection in order to learn. In process reflection, the practitioner might ask: "How conscientious have I been in using a collaborative approach during evaluation and intervention?" Using an instrumental learning approach, the practitioner could involve peers to assess through observation and record review the frequency of his or her collaboration with clients. In analyzing the peer data, the practitioner learns whether he or she has effectively encouraged collaboration during evaluation and intervention. The practitioner can then determine through a literature review and a survey of peers (i.e., communicative learning) the norm for collaboration. Should one be 100% collaborative, or is some lower percentage appropriate, given that there will be some clients who cannot or will not collaborate? After a norm is established, the practitioner can decide whether his or her frequency of collaboration should increase or remain the same. To increase the frequency of collaboration, the practitioner might need to learn strategies for improving the related interpersonal skills.

In moving to the level of premise reflection, the practitioner asks, "Why does collaboration with clients during evaluation and intervention matter? What alternatives to a collaborative approach exist?" To address these reflective questions, the practitioner could use an emancipatory learning approach to critically review the literature and outcomes data. The goal is to determine whether research exists to support the use of a collaborative approach. Perhaps research indicates the populations for which a collaborative approach is effective. It is possible that gender and age might play an influential role in the effectiveness of collaboration. Communicative learning also might be helpful in examining the beliefs of various client groups regarding collaboration and alternatives to collaboration. The way in which the client's cultural context influences the success of collaboration may lead to examining alternative approaches that might be more effective with a particular cultural group. Thus, transformative learning has occurred in that the practitioner understands that a collaborative approach may not be valued by all clients and that there are alternative approaches to developing intervention goals. Because practitioner learning is the goal of reflection, it is imperative that assumptions underlying practice strategies are not taken for granted, but are tested for their validity or are critically interrogated.⁵

References

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