

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle for Writing Center Training

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After conducting a difficult writing center session, consultants often talk among themselves about a frustrating client, like the one who just shrugs and says nothing during a consultation, or the recalcitrant student who refuses advice by telling the consultant, “My paper already makes sense to me.” Consultants, however, need to go beyond merely the “swapping of anecdotes” (Gibbs 54) about difficult clients. Directors can help consultants convert problem consultations into learning experiences.

The key to such conversion is reflection. Mike Mattison sums up the golden power derived from reflection: “This is a tool for learning, for growth, for coming to an understanding of theories and practices, for relating theory to practice” (38).

Well-known, widely used training techniques for reflection, such as keeping journals (Mattison), writing blogs (Hall), or producing a log (Yancey), prove valuable because consultants are writing down what happened during a difficult session. Nonetheless, these approaches—being mostly free-form—are not structured enough to ensure staff development. Instead, consultants need a systematic, step-by-step method that guides their reflections and engages them in learning from their experiences. Since 1988, Gibbs' Reflective Cycle has been in use, a framework that encourages health care professionals and teachers in the United Kingdom to reflect on their work.¹ By engaging in this methodical framework, consultants learn from uncomfortable sessions, preparing them to better handle future consultations.

BACKGROUND ON GIBBS' CYCLE

Graham Gibbs, a professor leading the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development at the UK's Oxford Brookes University, argues that those who help others need to “take into account . . . feelings surrounding an experience” (Sewall) so that they can see links “between the doing and the thinking” (Gibbs 4). Unfortunately, when teachers, for instance, reflect on their experiences, they are

not certain which part to discuss, and they often provide only “superficial descriptions” and “premature conclusions,” not always moving beyond their feelings about an event in order to take action (Gibbs 49). Gibbs believes that to learn from experience, teachers should engage in a self-assessment that will “ideally lead into planning for the next experience, in the form ‘next time I will . . .’” (51).

To encourage such self-assessment, Gibbs emphasizes learners must be mindful and reflective. Here “mindfulness” means being in “a generalized state of alertness to the activities one is engaged in” (Perkins and Salomon), that is, being aware of “immediate, real-time experience” (Featherstone et al.). Psychologist Ryan M. Niemiec provides a more specific definition of *mindfulness*: “self-regulation of attention with an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance (“3 Definitions”). During tough sessions, consultants “self-regulate” by “tak[ing] control of [their] attention” (Niemiec), like focusing on a client’s attitude, gestures, or voice; mindfulness also arises when consultants are “open” to whatever they focus on during the moment and when they are “curious” as to what the moment implies. Being “focused, open, and curious” (Niemiec) are prime ingredients for achieving mindfulness, a key principle on which Gibbs’ cycle is based.

Being mindful, though, is not enough. Gibbs also stresses learners must *reflect* on their experiences. Gibbs argues, “It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalizations or concepts can be generated” (14). This reflection is also central for developing consultants, as Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood explain: “The know-how of good tutors comes from a willingness to *reflect* on their efforts and to keep learning. Such tutors are eager both to confirm what they do well and to question any practices that impede productive interactions with students” (9, my emphasis). Mindfulness and reflection—the foundations of Gibbs’ Cycle—are vital to writing center staff education.

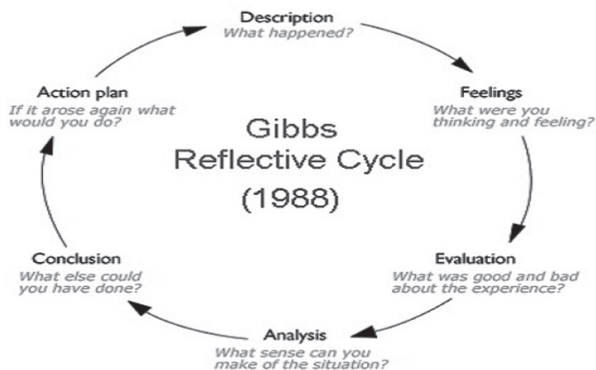
GIBBS’ REFLECTIVE CYCLE

The steps of the Cycle break down the process of mindfulness and reflection into a systematic, controlled approach. By applying these six steps to difficult consultations, consultants gain knowledge from their experience:

- *describing* what happened, perhaps providing background information (“Gibbs’ Reflective”);
- *telling* what you were *feeling* and *thinking* about the experience as you felt it and afterwards as well as how you related to the situation (Gibbs 49);

- *evaluating* what was good and bad about the experience; also, how it was resolved afterwards (“Gibbs’ Reflective”);
- *analyzing* the experience by telling why you think it happened and by seeing how it is like experiences you have had before (Gibbs 54); also, “what might have helped or hindered the event” (“Gibbs’ Reflective”);
- *drawing conclusions*, such as what else you could have done or how you could have avoided a negative experience (Gibbs 54);
- *formulating an action plan* for what you will do if the experience arises again. (Gibbs 53-54). (See figure 1.)

FIGURE 1: GIBBS’ REFLECTIVE CYCLE



Source: www.brookes.ac.uk/students/upgrade/study-skills/reflective-writing-gibbs [search “images + gibbs reflective cycle”]

Asking consultants to proceed through Gibbs’ methodical steps means they go beyond merely venting about tough sessions. They act as learners, gleaning information from one consultation and applying it to another; in other words, they engage in “reflective transfer” or the “process by which a single tutoring event and/or several tutoring events are reviewed and understood as a part of practice *theorized*” (Yancey 191).

EXAMINING THE STEPS OF GIBBS’ REFLECTIVE CYCLE

Although the Cycle appears to echo Benjamin Bloom’s well-known taxonomy, his taxonomy and the Cycle differ. Bloom’s is a taxonomy of cognition; Gibbs’ Cycle, however, is a set of ordered, sequential steps through which learners progress and end with insight about what to do the next time a situation arises. It should also be noted that while most of the Cycle’s steps are fairly self-explanatory, like *describe* the tough session and tell how it made you *feel*, the steps *evaluation* and *analysis*—key components of the Cycle—need to be

distinguished.

For the Cycle, learners *evaluate* by answering the question “What is good and bad about the experience?” (“Gibbs’ Reflective”). This definition of *evaluation* means learners should be objective, seeing the situation from both positive and negative angles. Consider, for example, “One of my students kept me sitting with him the entire session, helping with each MLA entry on his Works Cited page even though I had two other clients waiting. I wanted to leave him the Center’s handout, but he kept saying he needed my help.” This session is “good” in that the student realizes he needs help and has taken initiative to seek assistance. What is “less good” is how the client, lacking confidence, monopolizes the consultant’s time and fails to develop self-confidence.

Analysis may also pose problems. Gibbs’ definition does more than ask learners to break a topic into parts (the usual definition of *analysis*); it also has learners pull back, “extracting meaning” from the details by asking, “Why did things go well or didn’t? What knowledge of my own or academic literature [scholarship] can help explain the situation?” (“Reflection Toolkit”). For the MLA session, the consultant remembers how she, as a student, has also been frustrated when working with unfamiliar citation systems, so she understands how the client needs to acquire confidence when handling the demands posed by MLA. Gibbs’ approach to *analysis* helps learners remain detached and unemotional about a situation.

After describing the experience, telling one’s feelings, and evaluating and analyzing the situation, learners are ready for the fifth step: *drawing a conclusion*, that is, telling what else could have been done so that learners begin to think of options. Instead of assisting with each MLA citation, the consultant could have given the student a handout or a handbook to look up citations, modeling the process first for the student. Then, in the last step—the *action plan*—learners tell what they would do if the situation arose again, so that for the MLA student, the consultant could leave the student to use the resources but promise to return in a few minutes to help.

USING THE CYCLE FOR TRAINING

So that my consultants could engage in systematic reflection, I organized a group training session using Gibbs’ Cycle. About a week before the training meeting, each consultant received a notecard on which they were asked to *describe* a difficult session they had recently conducted, providing enough details so their fellow consultants could understand what had occurred.² Consultants wrote the cards anonymously. Then, at the training meeting, with the cards dramatically fanned out like a deck at a Las Vegas

casino, one card was drawn and read aloud. Filling out the cards accomplished step one: describing the situation. For example, a card *described*, “The client insisted every grammatical issue was a stylistic choice, e.g. ‘I know that sentence is a run-on, but that’s kinda what I was going for.’” The consultant who wrote the card volunteered that when the client ignored her advice about avoiding run-on sentences, the consultant felt “positively insulted” (*feelings*).

Then, I guided the group to *evaluate* the situation, telling what was good about it (the client possessed a sense of her own style) and what was bad (the client was not open to seeing her work through others’ eyes). Next, for *analysis*, the group tried to explain why the client was so determined to keep her sentence structure (the client may have been defensive because former teachers had criticized her, or she had previously received poor advice so she was reluctant to take it now). As part of *analysis*, they also linked the experience to what the consultants themselves had encountered before (a consultant who is a creative writer relates the client’s actions to what the consultant knows, stating the client is probably just “stuck in the fiction mode” so the client needs to adjust her editing for different types of writing). In fact, as the consultants analyzed the consultation, they decided the client was probably not aware of how academic writing worked, and she did not want to admit she was wrong.

To lead the discussion to the *conclusion* step, I asked, “What else could be done for the client?” Consultants said they would tell the client that run-ons may confuse readers and create too informal a tone for academic writing. For the *action plan*, consultants said, in the future, they would explain grammatical concerns by referring to the paper’s audience and to the demands of various genres. Only after we had worked our way through the six steps did I reveal the consultants had been methodically engaging in Gibbs’ Cycle and showed them the “critical lens” (Hall 117) or rationale behind the reflection so that they would understand the process. Then, we pulled another card and repeated the six steps.

ADVANTAGES OF GIBBS’ CYCLE

The original aim for the Cycle was to provide a “debriefing sequence” (Gibbs 46) so learners could explore their thoughts and feelings. Thus, the Cycle is ideal for helping to sort out the situations consultants encounter. The Cycle provides another advantage. Handling it as a group taps into “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 199) so prevalent in centers, where consultants teach one another how to be consultants. Using Gibbs’ cycle means reflection becomes “a public [endeavor] in order to enhance learning among tutors” (Hall 112-13). A consultant agrees: “The other consultants

were helpful in providing their unique perspectives on the questions. It was very reassuring to know the other consultants struggled with the same issues.” Proceeding through the structured sequence also shows that working in a center is not just a list of how-to’s (Hall 122). Rather, as one consultant comments, it is a matter of being “adaptable as consultants, and we want to showcase that adaptability in any way we can.”

DISADVANTAGES OF GIBBS’ CYCLE

Reflection itself poses dangers. “[R]eflective work is like a sharp knife. You wouldn’t try working in a kitchen without one, but you would also take care when handling it” (Mattison 47). One such danger is that reflection may make consultants believe there is an “ideal” consultation so that they upbraid themselves for supposedly falling short of perfection, and, as a result, they may lose “flexibility” (Mattison 43) when conducting sessions. However, Gibbs’ Cycle helps to discourage this misconception. There is no one right way to handle consultations, as demonstrated by the many pieces of advice the steps generate. As one consultant remarked about the Cycle, “Using reflection is a helpful tactic to become a better consultant. It was useful to be reminded that there are multiple angles with which to approach consultations.”

Carrying out the steps with a full cohort of consultants may also produce a procedural problem. Given their agile minds, consultants are likely to skip a step, such as going from *analysis* straight to *plan of action*, especially if the consultants are experienced. Conducting the session with the Cycle means directors must deliberately lead the group through the sequence, perhaps listing the steps on the board or stating, “We’ve spent some time on the feelings involved in this experience. Let’s move on to evaluating those experiences” (Gibbs 51) so that, at least for the first few cards, the group carries itself through the full sequence.

CONCLUSION

While performing Gibbs’ Cycle as a group activity is advantageous, directors can also offer consultants ways to use it individually, such as writing out responses to the steps in consultants’ journals. It could also be valuable as part of a professional review process for full-time consultants. During a consultation, Gibbs’ Cycle may even help clients engage in self-reflection about their own writing. Whether used in a group or by individual consultants, Gibbs’ cycle provides a series of steps so consultants can cultivate meta-level cognizance about their work. Then, they can transfer tutorial knowledge from one session to another (Devet). As one consultant says, “Sometimes it is hard to know how to react in certain situations, so this session [with Gibbs’ Cycle] will help me better aid clients.”

NOTES

1. I thank Mary Deane, Senior Lecturer in Education Development, Oxford Brookes University, UK, for introducing me to Gibbs' Reflective Cycle.

2. This notecard work received IRB approval.



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NEW FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies, edited by Jo Mackiewicz and Rebecca Day Babcock, Routledge, 2019.

The book includes chapters by writing center researchers discussing theories and methods used in their work, including genre theory, second-language acquisition theory, transfer theory, and disability theory, and methods of using ethnography, corpus analysis, and mixed-methods research.

Internationalizing the Writing Center: A Guide for Developing a Multilingual Writing Center, by Noreen Groover Lape. Parlor P, 2020.

The book provides a rationale, pedagogical plan, and administrative method for developing a multilingual writing center. The book incorporates work from writing center studies as well as second language acquisition studies, including English as a second language, English as a foreign language, second language writing, and foreign language writing.

Writing Centers at the Center of Change, edited by Joe Essid and Brian McTague. Routledge, 2019.

This collection includes chapters about eleven writing centers that adapted to change at their institutions during a decade of decreasing resources. Each author discusses the origins, appropriate responses, and new programs formed under changing circumstances.