

A graduated scenario on a Football / sport-coaching topic to facilitate learning of Reflective Practice

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It will not help you to learn to reflect if I give you academic definitions of reflection (of which there are many). My general take on reflection is the following.

Reflection is a form of mental processing - like a form of thinking - that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. Alternatively, we may simply ‘be reflective’, and then an outcome can be unexpected. The term ‘reflection’ is applied to relatively complex or ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and it largely refers to the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. There is an important depth dimension to reflection.

Metaphors can be helpful too and I particularly like this literary reference in the way that it suggests that we reflect (largely) on what we know already.

‘Harry stared at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original silvery white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

“What is it?” Harry asked shakily.

“This? It is called a pensieve”, said Dumbledore. “I sometimes find - and I am sure that you know the feeling - that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.”

“Er”, said Harry, who couldn’t truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

“At these times”, said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form” (pp518 – 9 from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire - J.K. Rowling, 2000: London, Bloomsbury)

We re-organise our minds as we reflect - I call it ‘cognitive housekeeping’. As we reorganize our minds, we learn more and the depth of the reorganizing determines just how much we learn. Telling you how I see reflection or how it is seen by Dumbledore will not help you much. The exercise below – called a Graduated Scenario – is designed to help you to come to a deeper understanding of reflection and its depth dimension.

The Graduated Scenario: The Coach / Manager's Story

Background:

The coach, Chris, is Level 3. He is coach / manager for a team playing in the Westsouthwest Premier Division. They are amateur (non-contract) players.

Updown is our rival. They beat us convincingly at their ground a week ago. Now to stay in the reckoning we must beat them on home turf. I've got concerns. Dave is our left back but also captain. The others look up to him. In the last match with Updown, he started by being unusually silent – not like himself. I asked him if he was all right and he said, 'I'm in the zone'. So, I said OK and moved on to other things. The first ten minutes was frantic – but the ref seemed in control. Then Dave let go with some crunching tackles, some reckless – not like him to do that either. The ref told him to calm down several times but he went on. The ref even came over and asked me to have a word with Dave. I signalled to Dave to cool it but he ignored me and turned his head away. Made me angry. I remember thinking then I should take him off before a disaster happened, but half time was two minutes away and I decided to wait. Then in injury time Dave made a dangerous tackle and the referee was right to send him off. So, we were down to ten, and the team was very unsettled. I could have cried. It was hopeless. We lost four-nil and Updown have been bragging about it ever since.

There've been friendlies with other teams since then. Dave's been much the same: he doesn't listen to me, he's silent then mildly aggressive and out of my control. He upsets the team – and me.

Account 1

So here we are – our place in the league and our reputation at stake. We've got the all-important return match with Updown on Saturday. And I've got Dave, our captain and left back still playing and behaving erratically, irresponsibly and so unlike his usual self. I've done the sensitive bit, tried to talk, got angry, shouted, threatened - but all he comes back with is pansy stuff like 'it's the time of the year' and he doesn't know 'why he's like this'. If he won't tell me, I can't do anything. I'm guessing there's a problem at home, probably marital (and I know all about those!). He's going to have to learn fast about leaving that stuff where it belongs. This game is seriously important for us. I either chance playing him and risk a performance like last time, or I pull him out, upset the team and potentially I'd be excluding our main chance of winning. So somehow today I know I've got to make contact with Dave in order to make decisions.

So, it is training night – cold, damp and dark and the field is wet. When I got to the ground this evening, the guys were grumpy and unenthusiastic. I was tired after a bad night. Our 17-year old had been clubbing and phoned at 2.00am – no taxis - would one of us come and get her. The wife argued the case for staying in bed because of her heavy teaching load the next day. What about our vital game? Julie can't get it into her head that coaching and managing a team is as tough as her job. 'Just a game – your pastime', she says. I didn't argue – got up and went and it was hard getting up this morning.

So, there was Dave, looking dreadful. He knows he's my main problem. I told him that I needed a talk with him once he got changed. He nodded then screwed up his face. I've just come into the office to have a think about him before seeing him. I hate these sorts of conversations, especially on a day when everyone's below par. I'm going to start off by telling him about the grief he's causing me and how I need to decide about Saturday. The problem is all about communication. I've got to know what's wrong and get it sorted. I need to get him to see the bad influence he's having on the rest of the team. If it is all to do with a problem he's having at

home, I'll listen sympathetically but then I have to tell him he must learn fast to leave it at home and face up to his responsibilities here.

Account 2

I am trying to think about how to deal with Dave after the incident in the game with Updown and his behaviour since, on and off the pitch. How can I get him back to playing as he normally does? He can be thoughtful and effective and he usually is proud to be captain. The problem is trying to get him to communicate with me. I've got a meeting with him in the office in a few minutes and I'm thinking again about how to approach him now it's getting critical.

I blame Dave for the Updown match – we all do. His behaviour was bad to say the least. When he went off, our play became disorganized and relations between the guys were disrupted. All the strategies went to pot. And on Saturday we have to face Updown again and we have to win convincingly to keep our reputation and stay in the league. All this stressful stuff about Dave is getting to us all. So how do I approach him – have I been going about it the right way or is there something I'm missing? Or just a thought – are there wider issues with the whole team and the way they all - including Dave - interact? Maybe it's just a matter of getting Dave to do what I tell him or maybe more. I've tried gently persuading, getting angry and telling him that there will be consequences for him if he doesn't get his act together and do what I say. I have to decide whether to play him on Saturday or to pull him out and risk totally disrupting the team for a second time.

To cap it all, it was a bad start this evening. All the guys looked rough, Dave more than most and he didn't react well when I said I needed to see him. His look made me think I must go and reflect a bit more before seeing him. It doesn't help that I'm feeling rough and somewhat downtrodden myself (thanks Julie!). But how can I get through to him? And how can I get the rest of the team to play without Dave if I pull him out? It begins to feel like a wider problem.

It's such a lonely situation, this, trying to work these things out. Being fairly new to coaching at this level, it would be good to talk it through with someone else – or maybe even the whole team.

Account 3

The incident in the Updown game has bothered me. I've told Dave I need to see him in a few minutes and his scowl made me feel I need to think carefully before this meeting. So, I've come in here to think. Dave seems to be at the heart of the problem, but then I just begin to wonder. I think about how my ex-teammate Jimmy would see it. He'd have got me to think of it in a broader context and he might tell me to try shifting from focusing on one player to the whole team. He'd always be trying to see incidents in a broad context. Maybe I'm wrong to focus on Dave. Sure there was his behaviour in the Updown game and how he came to be sent off, but then what followed in the game was a breakdown of play in the remaining members of the team and that did not involve Dave as such.

And then there is this communication thing. I just cannot get through to Dave. Jimmy would tell me to think through the way I'm going about it – what feelings, what power stuff is involved? And yes, I did shout at Dave the other day, and got near to swearing. That has not helped. I think there may be an issue about problems at home affecting play for Dave but maybe that's true for all of us sometimes - maybe me too. So, I should see all this as a longer term set of issues? There are, of course, decisions to be made now about seeing Dave in a few minutes and whether or not he's going to play on Saturday and that takes me also back to the matter of how taking him out could disrupt the whole team. I could deal with that with the whole team before they go tonight. It could be a general talk and not one in which I specifically mention

Dave and Updown (of course they'll all know it). Maybe I should call it a discussion not a 'talk'. Getting them to talk about it would be good. They may have perspectives that I do not see.

Pity Jimmy's holidaying abroad at present - but I could phone Sam and actually talk it all through with him before I decide exactly how to deal with these matters. He'll have different perspectives on the incident in the game and how I should go about dealing with it.

I begin to see that these moments of reflection have allowed me to reconsider the whole matter. I had been thinking that Dave was 'the problem' and this rethinking enables me to see it differently – and I should now think again about how I approach Dave.

Account 4

This incident in Updown game has bothered me. I've been reflecting on it and there's much to learn. I've hammered away at Dave this week and have got no-where. His behaviours not changed. I've asked to see him soon in the office so I'm sure he'll be gearing up to resist more flack from me. Flack won't work. I need a rethink. And he'll know that I've got doubts about Saturday's match. I think the issue's about more than Dave. Jimmy would have encouraged me to see it in a wider context. Doing that helps me to see that it is a whole team matter.

My first instinct was to assume that Dave has a problem – most likely marital and my reaction was that he should leave it at home. It all reminds me of Simon, in my last club. His wife suddenly took to drink. He'd be texting all day, checking up on her. His heart wasn't in his game and he took out his feelings on the field. He wouldn't say what was wrong. I've been subconsciously assuming that something is similar for Dave. Perhaps I'm putting that assumption onto him. Do I even need to know the reason for his behaviour?

I gave Sam a bell too. It's is good to listen to what I say to him – and to hear his perspective on it. He agreed that having another go at Dave is pointless. I told him how the team look up to Dave and players are influenced by him. And I found myself saying quite clearly how the problem in the Uptown match was not so much one about Dave but how the team fell apart because when he wasn't there. It was the team that lost the match, not Dave.

I feel clearer. I won't go for a direct talk with Dave. He'll clam up (wouldn't I?). It seems that there might be three matters here. The central problem is how the players are influenced by Dave and only play well when he's there and on form – that is an issue about the players, not Dave. So that gives me a different way of approaching the matter - an approach to the whole team. If I avoid directly implicating Dave and take the pressure off, he may be able sort things for himself.

So, let me check out my plan: I'll have a brief chat with Dave (not in my office - too threatening). I'll say that I've been approaching this matter differently. I'll tell him that I see that something is bothering him but that the real problem for me is not him, but the effect of his behaviour on the team.... No, I will put it a different way – the problem is the way the team is influenced by the way he or any other player is. It was the team who lost the Updown match, not Dave. If he wants to say more at any time, he can and I'll trust him, but mostly my focus will be on the team.

Then I'll have a talk with the team and acknowledge we're in trouble. They all see it as Dave's problem and they think I see it like that but I'll say that I see that the problem is with the team. That'll surprise them! I'm going to trust that making them all aware of the matter will help them to deal with it sensibly if I choose not to play Dave on Saturday. And about that - I'll make up my mind about whether Dave plays after meeting with the team and when I can see whether he responds to this new approach. He may not respond, and I may need to think again.

After Saturday I'll get going a discussion with them all of how home issues can get to players and we'll talk about managing that and I will say I need to manage that better too.

In deepening reflection, there are shifts –

- *From description to reflective account*
The first account just tells the story with much detail that is not helping the reflection process. The accounts become increasingly reflective, though there are still some words that refer to the subject matter of the reflection.
- *From no questions to questions to responding to questions*
There are no questions in the first account. There are questions in the second account but there are no responses to them. They demonstrate that the subject is aware of an issue but is not going to reflect any more deeply on it.
- *The emotional influence is recognised, and then handled increasingly effectively*
Feelings associated with the event are noticed, then explored then their part in the reflective process are recognized.
- *There is a 'standing back from the event'*
It may be that time passes during the sequence of accounts. As we get further from an event, we can potentially see it in a broader context.
- *There is a shift from the story of the event to self-questioning and challenge to own ideas.*
There is increasing criticality
- *There is increasing recognition of relevance of prior experience.*
If we reflect on our own, we can only call on our own experience to analyse the event. Our own prior experience will bias the process of reflection. It is important to recognise this. To counter this, we take the points of view of others into account (see below)
- *There is increasing willingness to take into account others' views.*
Others' views on the event broaden our perspective and help to avoid the narrowness and bias of our own view. This might include looking at written or related visual material.
- *There is a shift towards metacognition.*
Metacognition is important in deep reflection. It is a willingness to review in a critical manner the processes of the reflection that have been undergone - Have I made assumptions? Have I been unduly biased for a particular reason. Are there other points of view that would reasonably contradict my conclusions?

A Generic Framework for Reflective Writing

There are four 'levels' of depth of reflection described below. They do not necessarily accord directly with the accounts in the exercise – but provide a general guide to the qualities of deepening reflection.

Descriptive Writing

This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection. It may tell a story but from one point of view at a time and generally one point at a time is made. Ideas tend to be linked by the sequence of the account / story rather than by meaning. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.

There may be references to emotional reactions but they are not explored and not related to behaviour.

The account may relate to ideas or external information, but these are not considered or questioned and the possible impact on behaviour or the meaning of events is not mentioned.

There is little attempt to focus on particular issues. Most points are made with similar weight.

The writing could hardly be deemed to be reflective at all. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that would serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though a good description that precedes reflective accounts will tend to be more focused and to signal points and issues for further reflection.

Descriptive account with some reflection

This is a descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection.

The basic account is descriptive in the manner of description above. There is little addition of ideas from outside the event, reference to alternative viewpoints or attitudes to others, comment and so on. However, the account is more than just a story. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question or there are questions to be asked and answered. Points on which reflection could occur are signalled.

There is recognition of the worth of further exploring but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

The questioning does begin to suggest a 'standing back from the event' in (usually) isolated areas of the account.

The account may mention emotional reactions, or be influenced by emotion. Any influence may be noted, and possibly questioned.

There is a sense of recognition this is an incident from which learning can be gained, – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

Reflective writing (1)

There is description but it is focused with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. There may be a sense that the material is being mulled around. It is no longer a straight-forward account of an event, but it is definitely reflective.

There is evidence of external ideas or information and where this occurs, the material is subjected to reflection.

The account shows some analysis and there is recognition of the worth of exploring motives or reasons for behaviour

Where relevant, there is willingness to be critical of the action of self or others. There is likely to be some self-questioning and willingness also to recognise the overall effect of the event on self. In other words, there is some 'standing back' from the event.

There is recognition of any emotional content, a questioning of its role and influence and an attempt to consider its significance in shaping the views presented.

There may be recognition that things might look different from other perspectives, that views can change with time or the emotional state. The existence of several alternative points of view may be acknowledged but not analysed.

In other words, in a relatively limited way the account may recognise that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time but it does not deal with this in a way that links it effectively to issues about the quality of personal judgement.

Reflective writing (2)

Description now only serves the process of reflection, covering the issues for reflection and noting their context. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and internal dialogue.

The account shows deep reflection, and it incorporates a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change.

A metacognitive stance is taken (i.e. critical awareness of one's own processes of mental functioning – including reflection).

The account probably recognises that events exist in a historical or social context that may be influential on a person's reaction to them. In other words, multiple perspectives are noted.

Self-questioning is evident (an 'internal dialogue' is set up at times) deliberating between different views of personal behaviour and that of others).

The view and motives of others are taken into account and considered against those of the writer.

There is recognition of the role of emotion in shaping the ideas and recognition of the manner in which different emotional influences can frame the account in different ways.

There is recognition that prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of current behaviour.

There is observation that there is learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted.

There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing.