

## Investigating the Value of Reflection Before Action

by Roger Greenaway, Reviewing Skills Training

### METHODOLOGY

The workshop process will attempt to model the workshop theme. This means that participants will frequently be experiencing 'reflection before action' during the workshop. I will introduce the principles behind 'reflection before action' and there will be opportunities to try out what this means in practice. Once participants appreciate the possibilities for applying these principles in practice, I hope it will be possible to work together to create or adapt strategies for reflecting before action – especially any that might apply directly to participants' own work context.

### ABSTRACT

Experiential learning cycles present learning as a continuous process in which each stage both follows and precedes all other stages. But the reflection stage is often referred to as if it is the final stage: whether as a 'close', 'closing' or 'closure', or as a 'wrap up', or a 'winding down' or even as a 'post mortem'. If we think or talk about reflection as if it is an ending, or if we always time reflection to happen at the end of a session, then we should not be too surprised if there is a general powering down of energy in the group whenever it is time for reflection or review.

This workshop is about 'reviewing before doing' or 'reflection before action'. This is different timing to Schon's 'reflection *on* action' or 'reflection *in* action', although David Boud does write about the value of reflection *before* action. We will explore the benefits of reflection before action and we will sample three different kinds of reflection before action:

1. **Energisers:** reflective methods that raise energy while also focusing attention on a past experience related to a theme that is about to be explored.
2. **Active Audits:** reflective methods in which people carry out audits of what they already have that could be useful for achieving an imminent purpose.
3. **Balancing Acts:** reflective methods that consider balances between what is present and what is missing, between individual and group perspectives, and between internal and external forces.

'Reflection before action' encourages people to connect with past experiences before rushing into the next activity. By choosing (or creating) a suitable reflective method before the next activity, you are adding value to past experience in a way that is also likely to add value to what is just about to happen. This is what I understand by 'reflection before action'.

In most cases these reflective methods are active group processes that give both energy and focus to reflection on experience.

### FULL ARTICLE

You can download [this article](http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/Reflection-Before-Action.pdf) from <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/Reflection-Before-Action.pdf>

## Reflection Before Action

Reviewing usually happens after an event. This is normal timing. But is it always perfect timing? Are there other good times to have a review?

Well, you can review DURING activities. For example:

- reflection-in-action (Schon\*)
- half time review (in games of two halves)
- taking time out (with a learning buddy or coach or video diary)

But 'Reflection Before Action' is about bringing reviewing even further forwards and reviewing BEFORE the action starts. In some areas of practice, reviewing is the natural starting point, such as when you:

- carry out a training needs analysis
- involve participants in designing a programme that connects to their real world
- kick off an 'Appreciative Inquiry' with the question 'What works well?'
- or when you search for relevant expertise with a 'peer assist' (Collison and Parcell\*)

In other situations a review at the start does not seem 'natural' at all. In 'Reflection Before Action' you will find some 'natural' and some 'less obvious' ways of starting a session with a review.

John Dewey wrote that 'every experience lives on in further experiences' (Dewey\*). By trying out the ideas in Reflection Before Action you will be able to help people select and harness those experiences which they most want to 'live on' in the next activity.

<b>CONTENTS</b>		<i>page</i>
<b>10 Tips</b>	Talent Search; Reschedule Breaks; What's On Top?; Time-out after Briefing; Participant Researchers; Whose Turn?; Progress Check; Spotlight One Story; Reflective Sentences; Tuning-in (to people, place and programme)	3
<b>10 Benefits</b>	Importance; Continuity; Surprise; Always Thinking; Energy; Flow; Perfect Timing; Perfect Priming; Purpose; Integration	4
<b>10 Activities</b>	<p><b>Energisers</b>                      Good News Graffiti; Brief Encounters; Sim Survey</p> <p><b>Active Audits</b>                    Talent Show; Auditions and Interviews; Back to the Future; Persuasion Line</p> <p><b>Balancing Acts</b>                Missing Person, Solo Challenge, Snakes and Ladders</p>	5 6 7
<b>Is it a Bird? Is it a Man?</b>		8
<b>References and Notes</b>		9

## **Reflection Before Action: 10 TIPS**

### **1. TALENT SEARCH**

Get participants busy discovering the diversity of talent and experiences in the room. For example: try out Brief Encounters or Sim Survey.

### **2. RESCHEDULE BREAKS**

Review recent learning immediately after a break and before introducing the next exercise. This increases the chances that recent learning will be applied in the new exercise. The new pattern will look something like this: activity – break – review – activity – break – review -

### **3. WHAT'S ON TOP?**

Pay attention to each individual's current state by asking what feelings, fresh insights, questions, words or phrases are 'on top'. Not only does this help to meet people's need for attention, it also helps you pitch what comes next in a suitable way.

### **4. TIME-OUT AFTER BRIEFING**

After briefing the next exercise, create a 'time-out' for people to consider what recent learning could be useful. Alternatively, refuse to start the clock on the next exercise until you are satisfied that sufficient connection has been made to recent learning.

### **5. PARTICIPANT RESEARCHERS**

Involve participants in researching safety, such as by including these questions in a Sim Survey: What do you already know about safety that will help us stay safe in this next exercise? What do you already know about the activity, the environment and how your group behaves that you need to consider in order to stay safe? (Adapt for other objectives.)

### **6. WHOSE TURN?**

Review whose turn it is to ... lead, go first, keep time, observe, make the tea, or to carry out whatever responsibilities might otherwise fall to the same few people.

### **7. PROGRESS CHECK**

Review what progress individuals are making on personal targets, with a view to creating extra support or opportunity for those who might need extra encouragement. Spokes (a kind of human bullseye) is a quick method for viewing such progress.

### **8. SPOTLIGHT ONE STORY**

Highlight one person's story. As an alternative to always trying to include everyone in every review, you can save pre-activity reviews for highlighting one individual's learning story – so that by the end of the programme each individual has had the chance of being in the spotlight at least once.

### **9. REFLECTIVE SENTENCES**

Use a round (or pair and share) to get everyone making connections between past present and future. Try these sentence beginnings: 'This situation / place / activity reminds me of ...'; 'What we

are about to do reminds me of ...'; 'I was ... I am ... I will ...'

## 10. TUNING IN TO PEOPLE PLACE AND PROGRAMME

Find even more 'starter' reviews by searching <http://reviewing.co.uk> for 'Activity Map' and 'Observation Walk'. Also try creative tweaks of any other reviewing methods that can be used for bringing past experience into the immediate future.

## Reflection Before Action: 10 BENEFITS

Many of these benefits arise from changes you can make in programmes where the normal structure for a session is 'brief-plan-do-review' (or similar). Some of the benefits described below can be achieved simply by changing the timing of the break so that the break occurs after the activity and before the review. A review before an activity can draw on *any* prior experience and does not need to focus exclusively on people's most recent experiences within the programme.

### 1. IMPORTANCE

Reviewing at the start demonstrates your commitment to reviewing and that you recognise its *importance*. If you leave reviewing until the end, and you do not have time to do it well, your participants will soon get the impression that reviewing is the *unimportant* bit tagged on at the end.

### 2. CONTINUITY

Reviewing at the start demonstrates that it is part of a *continuous cycle* that has no beginning or end. You can start and stop wherever you like! You are not breaking any rules (or inventing any new theories) by reviewing first. You are simply applying experiential learning theory - in which the continuous cycle has no standard starting and finishing points.

### 3. SURPRISE

Reviewing at the start *surprises participants* who are accustomed to reviewing at the end. Do it well and it will be a pleasant surprise that awakens their reflective processes from the very beginning.

### 4. ALWAYS THINKING

Reviewing at the start helps to keep review, reflection, thinking and learning *ticking over* – so review at every opportunity, including before the activity. (If the gaps between reviews are too long, people can get so absorbed in the action that they may do little reflecting until it's all over.)

### 5. ENERGY

Why struggle with a review when people are tired, when you can simply take a break and start the next session when people are awake, alert and more energised? For example, on a multi-day programme you can start the day with a review of the last activity of the previous day.

### 6. FLOW

Reviewing at the start *reduces the gap* between the learning from the previous activity and its application (if relevant) in the next activity. This helps to create more flow in a programme. A shorter gap between reviewing and the next activity makes it more likely that learning will be transferred (if relevant).

## 7. PERFECT TIMING

Start with a review and you can give the review *whatever time it needs* – assuming that you can be flexible with the time needed for the activity that follows.

## 8. PERFECT PRIMING

Review after a break and you are better able to provide the *perfect lead in* to the next activity. Participants are refreshed and the break will also help clear your head and prepare for priming the next activity – complete with relevant connections with what has gone before.

## 9. PURPOSE

A pre-activity review has a *clear purpose* when it highlights the very things that will be assets in the exercise that follows. (Unlike an 'after activity' review which can feel like a 'dead end' going nowhere, especially if it is referred to as a 'close', a 'closure', or even a 'wrap up' or 'post mortem'.)

## 10. INTEGRATION

Reviewing at the start has its advantages but it does not rule out reviewing at other times. So you have nothing to lose by getting in a review early - and then reviewing as often as you like! This integrates reviewing into your practice while also getting participants into *a regular habit of reflecting on experience*.

## Reflection Before Action: ENERGISERS

These three energisers are

- *reflective* because they draw on people's experiences
- *energising* because they draw on positive experiences
- *suitable for starting an event* because you can readily include late arrivals

## GOOD NEWS GRAFFITI

Good News Graffiti is particularly well suited to groups that meet regularly. As people arrive they are invited to write up their good news headlines on flip chart easels that are on display around the room. Experiment with different page titles to generate a suitable variety of good news. You decide whether to keep the good news focused on the work of the group and whether it is helpful to invite the sharing of other good news such as achievements outside work. This sharing of good news as people arrive helps to set a positive tone, while also acknowledging how people are contributing to the work of the group. Good News Graffiti could be seen as another way of asking the appreciative question: 'What is working well around here?'

## BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Everyone receives a card with the instructions on one side and two unique questions on the other side. Following their instructions people quickly pair up and choose one of their questions to ask to their partner. The questions are designed to bring out short stories of success related to the overall theme of the event. After answering each other's question, partners swap cards and find a new partner. And so it continues for as long as you want. It is also suitable for any size of group (from 10 to 100 or more). One ready-to-use example of Brief Encounters is at:

<http://reviewing.co.uk/success/icebreaker.htm>

**SIM SURVEY (Simultaneous Survey)**

This looks much the same as Brief Encounters (from a distance) but it tends to be a little more serious and needs more time. In Sim Survey, people do not swap cards: they keep their unique question and report back to the whole group with an anonymised summary of what they have learned from their interviews. Best suited to groups of 10-30 people. To reduce the time needed for interviews and for reporting back, keep to a maximum of ten unique questions. This means that some people may have identical questions – in which case people with the same questions can meet up to collate their answers into a joint verbal report.

**Reflection Before Action: ACTIVE AUDITS**

These three success-focused auditing exercises allow participants to reflect on the talents they have, and on how these talents can be applied towards achieving an individual goal or a group task.

**TALENT SHOW**

Find an object or picture postcard representing a talent you have that you would like to bring to the next activity (or to the rest of the programme). Each person gives an example of where they have used this talent and of how they now hope to use it, or develop it. Alternatively (where people are overly modest) participants first share their 'talents' in twos or threes before introducing each other's talents in the larger group. After each talent is presented, it is put on show on a low table in the centre of the group – or wherever the growing collection can readily be seen by everyone. This may not be everyone's idea of a 'talent show' but it is a useful reviewing technique for focusing energy and talent towards a common goal.

**AUDITIONS AND INTERVIEWS**

Where a group task requires specific roles or responsibilities, show these in a list of vacancies and invite applications from the group (two or three people per vacancy). Those choosing not to apply for any vacancy automatically acquire the responsibility of serving on the interview panel. Now provide time for applicants to prepare for their audition. At the same time the interview panel meet to elect a chair and prepare for how they will manage the auditions. (Or you can appoint yourself as the chair!) Because this is an 'audition' rather than an interview, each applicant should be prepared to do a brief cameo performance demonstrating their suitability for the role. Applicants can also expect questions from the interview panel. Expect fun and humour, but ensure that humour is not of the humiliating kind.

**BACK TO THE FUTURE**

Thinking about results is *forward* thinking. But what if *backward* thinking could help people get the results they want? Asking people about what they already have (that will be useful on their journey) is good preparation. It can even help them find short-cuts, time-savers and forgotten resources.

*Back to the Future* takes the 'traveller' (learner) closer to an important goal by reviewing past and present factors that could help them on their journey to their goal. It is an exercise that focuses on helpful factors in the past and present that are real and available for achieving an important goal. It involves recalling relevant experiences and drawing confidence, energy and learning from them. This process helps people approach their goal more wisely and confidently - and with a greater chance of success.

**Back to the Future: Useful questions to ask the traveller**

If the answer to any question makes the traveller feel 'closer' to their goal, they should move backwards a suitable distance towards their goal.

- 'What knowledge or experience do you have that will help you on this journey?'
- 'What skills or strengths do you have that will help you on this journey?'
- 'What values or motivations do you have that will help you on this journey?'
- 'What resources or support do you have that will help you on this journey?'
- 'What have you (or others) already done to help you achieve this goal?'
- 'In what ways will this conversation help you achieve your goal?'

**PERSUASION LINE**

This exercise provides a graphic and memorable way of getting a group into the habit of carrying out an audit before making a plan. You ask much the same questions (as in Back to the Future) to the group as a whole. For example: *"What experiences / knowledge / skills / values / confidence / achievements etc. do you already have as a group that will help you tackle this next challenge successfully?"*

Make a 5 metre line on the floor (eg with a rope) leading to an object in the centre of the group circle that represents successful achievement of the next group task. Explain that for every convincing answer they make, you will move (gradually) from the far end of the rope towards the object. Once they have persuaded you to move all the way to the object, the group can switch from audit mode to planning mode. In planning mode you ask questions about how they will use what they already have (which they have just established). The pattern is repeated: you gradually move towards the goal end of the line if they can persuade you that their proposals will really help them achieve their goal. When I am walking the line, I try to insist on evidence (for the audit) and clarity (for the plan). There is no need to do both versions – sometimes the audit is sufficient preparation.

**Reflection Before Action: BALANCING ACTS**

Up to this point, all of the 'Reflection Before Action' exercises have had a strong positive focus. These next three exercises allow for a more balanced approach.

- Missing Person is a creative way of looking at the strengths and weaknesses in a group.
- Solo Challenge starts by encouraging each individual to commit themselves to a task or activity that they would find particularly challenging and personally relevant.
- Snakes and Ladders is a more artistic version of Force Field Analysis or SWOT analysis. It is about how existing strengths and weaknesses might come into play in the next challenge.

**MISSING PERSON**

As with most reviewing methods, Missing Person is suitable for all ages with a little tweaking here and there. It is best used after a group have already carried out a number of different activities together, so that they have a range of group experiences to draw upon. The method is future

focused, the key question being 'What kind of person would you welcome into your group to help you achieve your goals?'. But to answer this question the group looks back over their experiences together thinking about what has been missing from their performance so far and how a new person could help to bring about improvements. A more detailed description is at:

[http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11\\_2.htm](http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11_2.htm)

### **SOLO CHALLENGE**

For Solo Challenge, group members all need to know each other fairly well. Solo Challenge starts as an appraisal exercise, in which the group (of up to around 10 people) generate ideas for suitably challenging 30 minute tasks for each individual. Each challenge is tailored to the perceived needs of each individual. Anyone in the group (including the facilitator and the individual being offered a challenge) has the power of veto over any proposal. For example, proposals have been vetoed because they are unsafe, too easy, too hard, not interesting enough, not related to the person's needs, unlikely to be fulfilling, etc. Vetoes help to raise the quality of the whole process. If it is proving too difficult to find acceptable challenges within about 30 minutes, take a break or postpone Solo Challenge until later in the programme. the facilitator can use their veto to ensure value and relevance for each individual right from the start of this exercise. A full description of the whole process is at:

[http://reviewing.co.uk/toolkit/solo\\_challenge.htm](http://reviewing.co.uk/toolkit/solo_challenge.htm)

### **SNAKES AND LADDERS**

Before an activity ask:

'What snakes do you each bring to this activity that could cause you or others to slide back down?'

'What ladders do you each bring to this activity that could assist the process or raise your game?'

And (like Missing Person) you can ask about the group as whole:

'What snakes lurk in this group's way of doing things that could cause you to slide back down?'

'What ladders does the group have that could assist the process or raise your game?'

With some groups you may want to go the whole way with this method and have them make a snakes and ladders board, and play the game.

Snakes and Ladders is just one example of a Metaphor Map. A Metaphor Map is a graphic way of representing past experiences. It can then be used to help people anticipate and prepare for navigating future challenges, or it can be repeatedly used as a reviewing tool to reflect on the journey taken. More about Metaphor Maps: [http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11\\_2.htm](http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11_2.htm)

### **IS IT A BIRD? IS IT A MAN?**

In which section of the facilitator's toolbox does Snakes and Ladders really belong?

- Is it a reviewing technique?
- Is it a game?
- Is it a planning technique?
- Is it a structure for an appraisal session?
- Is it a skills development exercise?
- Is it a team building exercise?

My answer: it could be all of these. If the naming of the snakes and the ladders arises from past experience (rather than being plucked from thin air) then it qualifies as a reviewing exercise. The fact that it leads so well into anticipating the future, does not disqualify it from being a 'reviewing' exercise. In fact, like all of the methods described in 'Reflection Before Action', it encourages people to connect with past experiences before rushing into the next activity.

By choosing (or creating) a suitable review before the next activity, you are adding value to past experience in a way that is also likely to add value to what is just about to happen. This is what I mean by 'Reflection Before Action'.

### AND FINALLY ... ANOTHER WAY TO BEGIN

Ask a group to review the activity they are about to do - 'as if\*' they had just completed it. Stepping into the world of imagination can be a welcome change to the normal routine – and it can readily provide breakthroughs in learning. If your review of an imagined forthcoming event goes well you might find that there is no need to review the event after it has happened for real. And if your review of an imagined event goes really, really well you might not even need to do the activity!

---

### POSTSCRIPT

#### HOW 'REFLECTION BEFORE ACTION' IS DIFFERENT TO 'FRONTLOADING'

One reader thought this article was about 'frontloading', so I have added this note for clarification. There are differences in both meaning and philosophy between 'reflection before action' and 'frontloading'. The meaning of 'frontloading' is best presented by the authors who coined the term:

Frontloading is a learning strategy used in adventure education in which participants are briefed on the learning objectives prior to the activity, thereby encouraging learning to take place before or during the event. (Priest & Gass, 1994) "Front" indicates that the facilitation takes place up front, or before the experience. "Loading" refers to the fact that the learning is loaded together, or emphasized, in combination beforehand. In summary, frontloading means punctuating key learning points in advance of the adventure experience rather than reviewing or debriefing any learning after. (Priest & Gass, 2005: 207)

The main differences in **meaning** are that:

- 'Reflection before action' is primarily reflective whereas 'frontloading' is primarily directive.
- 'Reflection before action' involves reflecting on past experience (even when one eye is on the future), whereas 'frontloading' is entirely future-focused.
- 'Frontloading' is reduces the need for reflection afterwards (Priest & Gass, 2005: 207) whereas 'reflection before action' emphasises the value of reflection, and is likely to increase time spent reflecting.

The main differences in **philosophy** between 'reflection before action' and 'frontloading' are that:

- 'Reflection before action' is fully compatible with discovery learning, inductive learning, exploration, self-development and all kinds of learning from experience.
- 'Frontloading' (together with 'funneling') belongs to a more directive and deductive approach

to learning known as 'adventure programming'.

- Despite these philosophical differences both approaches do involve goal-setting, experience and reflection.

For the best of both worlds perhaps you could try mixing both approaches? Or you could dig deeper into the differences by viewing Bill Krouwel's 'The Value of Serendipitous Learning'.

---

## \* REFERENCES and NOTES

'Reflection Before Action' is a revised version of 'Reviewing for Starters' which was published as Active Reviewing Tips 11.2. This re-titled and re-written version is partly to avoid confusion with my 'Starters' page at <http://reviewing.co.uk/stories/starters.htm> which describes storytelling methods for starting a review. This is a different concept to 'Reflection Before Action' which is about priming an activity (or programme) by preceding it with a review.

Schon, D. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1991)  
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1857423194/reviewingskillst>

'Peer Assist' is described in Collison and Parcell's *Learning to Fly* (2001) which is reviewed at <http://reviewing.co.uk/reviews/learning-to-fly.htm>

Dewey, J. *Experience and Education* (1938)

Missing Person:

[http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11\\_2.htm](http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11_2.htm)

Solo Challenge:

<http://reviewing.co.uk/toolkit/solo.challenge.htm>

Metaphor Maps:

[http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11\\_2.htm](http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/11_2.htm)

'As If' (reviewing an imaginary event) is described in my article on Big Picture Reviewing at: <http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/big-picture-reviewing.htm#asif>

## POSTSCRIPT REFERENCES

Krouwel, W. The Value of Serendipitous Learning: A dawning critique of frontloading and metaphor in adventure education in "*Pathways*" – *the Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 17(1), 2005 <http://digbig.com/5bdtdx>

Priest, S.; Gass, M. Frontloading with Paradox & Double Binds in *The journal of adventure education and outdoor leadership* (1994) <http://digbig.com/5bdtdw>

Priest, S.; Gass, M. *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming*, Human Kinetics (2005)  
National Institute, Landmark Colleges. Using varied instructional techniques: inductive and deductive teaching approaches. (2005) <http://digbig.com/5bdtea>

Get more free articles like this by subscribing to Active Reviewing Tips at: <http://reviewing.co.uk>