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Second-order reflection

We can learn a lot about ourselves if we just take the time.

Andrew Peck steps into the hall of mirrors.

This month's reflective article is about 'reflection', and the process of reflecting for publication. I feel I am well qualified to comment as I've been doing this since Winter 2012.

First off, reflection is valuable in its own right (as I'm sure many of the Fellows who are keeping reflective notes on their CPD journeys (page 12) will agree). The process of looking at yourself and your circumstances with a critical eye throws up useful observations and lets you see yourself as others might see you. Some evidence for this comes from times I've had students keep reflective journals alongside their academic work: generally, the students who improved most by the end of the course were those who were most brutal with themselves in their reflections.

I've learnt about myself while writing these articles. Some of the observations are quite granular and would only be useful to the outsider trying to impersonate me in the written sphere (for example, I prefer the older spellings of 'learnt' and 'whilst'). Others relate to my attitudes to professionalism and to our working life. I believe strongly that employers have a duty to provide safe and healthy working environments,¹ but that once those measures are in place, a professional should be a confident and assertive individual.² These beliefs might not sound that important, but it is worth knowing about them for the times I find myself mentoring younger employees or stepping into a new team for the first time.

I also believe strongly in the value of what we do as professionals, and that, fundamentally, more people would struggle in life if it went unexplained. I base this not on my own struggles with technology as I find new kit and software to work with rather like a jigsaw puzzle but on my struggles with people, who I wish came with a user manual, or at least warning signs.

That's the real point about reflection: it acts as our intrapersonal 'release notes', enabling us to bug-hunt, and provided we act on what we find, improve the system. If you're not already keeping a reflective journal of some description, I'd seriously consider

starting. It's a good habit to get into and can help you track and reach your goals.

Of course, you're not reading my reflective journal: this article is



Reflection: Why did it work (or not)? What can I do in the future? How can I learn from it?



published. Normally, only the author sees a personal reflective journal (and potentially a peer), so anything is fair game. You're all reading this, so there are things I just can't write about.

There are 'in confidence' discussions with clients and other members of the ISTC that I am sure we could all learn from, and I could be tempted to 'anonymise' them. However, I'm also conscious that when I see an 'anonymised' job posted by a recruiter on LinkedIn, I can usually guess the actual employer pretty quickly. Can you guess who Emit of PlumFruit could be? Or tell me a manufacturer of jet engines from the Midlands? So giving all but the briefest context is not possible.

The other thing to remember is that reflection is not about complaining. If you're looking at a scenario and want to say, "X upset me" or "the design team is hard to work with" you're doing it wrong. Instead, work out what it is about your character that allows X to wind you up so much (this doesn't mean X is right, it just means you'll be better armed next time) or what you can do to both facilitate the design team members and cover yourself when they eventually make the project miss its deadline.

Then there is stuff I can't quite make sense of yet. It'd be fine in a professional journal to write open-ended pieces or questions to yourself, but if the furthest I've got with a reflection is that "I need to know more", it's not ready for this column. This is a problem as most reflections are (and I'd argue, should be) questions. Reflection is not "Had a meeting, everyone was happy, therefore I'm awesome". Reflection is answering the questions, "Why did that meeting

go well? How can I learn and reproduce that success with my awkward client... the one who still gives technical authoring tasks to the secretarial pool when he catches them checking their Facebook status?"

I also cannot criticise my employer. With most people, this is solely because it is unprofessional, but another incentive is that my kids may need babysitting by their granny in the near future. I'm also very careful to make sure that these articles aren't a back door to the mind of the ISTC President... although there are things you may have picked up along the way, like the fact she runs a dog-friendly office, that I'm encouraged to continue with CPD and take qualifications, and the kind of industries we work with.

This is the part of the article where a good author would summarise what they've said and provide a final pithy analysis-based conclusion... but that would be third-order thoughts, which are more than a little difficult to contain.³ Instead, I'd invite you to try reflecting on your own practice and activities. Look at yourself critically and start to work out, issue by issue and incident by incident, what makes you tick. Among others, Sun Tzu⁴ would suggest that this self-knowledge has a big part to play in guaranteeing success in the battles you need to fight. **C**

References

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- ³ Pratchett, T (2004) A Hat Full of Sky. Corgi Childrens.
- ⁴ Sun Tzu The Art of War.



Andrew Peck MISTC works for Clearly Stated as a technical communicator. His background is as a Higher Education lecturer and military language trainer.

E: Andrew@clearly-stated.co.uk
W: www.clearly-stated.co.uk
B: blog.clearly-stated.co.uk
Tw: @writerpeck



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