What is reflection?

When we reflect, we consider deeply something that we might not otherwise have given much thought to. This helps us to learn. Reflection is concerned with consciously looking at and thinking about our experiences, actions, feelings, and responses, and then interpreting or analyzing them in order to learn from them (Atkins and Murphy, 1994; Boud et al., 1994). Typically we do this by asking ourselves questions about what we did, how we did it, and what we learnt from doing it.

Reflecting on academic or professional practice in this way may make your personal beliefs, expectations, and biases more evident to you. This understanding of yourself should help you to carry out your studies more successfully, since it makes you aware of the assumptions that you might make automatically or uncritically as a result of your view of the world.

Becoming reflective

The skills associated with stepping back and pausing to look, listen, and reflect are closely related to those concerned with critical thinking which also requires you to 'unpack' whatever you are focusing on, not simply accept what you read or hear at face value. Through this process you will probably identify things you would not otherwise notice. Moon (2004: 181) notes similarities between being reflective and using an imaginary instrument called a 'pensieve' (Rowling, 2000: 518) in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*:

> '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.'

The key to reflecting is spotting the patterns and links in thought that emerge as a result of your experiences in life and in learning. Sometimes this is difficult for learners because the focus is on you and this might not feel comfortable—especially in an academic context where you are usually encouraged to depersonalize your work such as your essays and reports.

Remember that you try to avoid saying 'I' in essays? So, when writing reflectively, you need to find a way to be both academic and also personal—and that is not always easy. You may be both

referencing academic theory and, in the same piece of writing, describing an exciting learning experience you had—becoming reflective is in part about feeling comfortable with this dual process.

The great benefit of including reflection in your learning is that by understanding why you do something in a particular way and recognizing how you feel about it, you can spot where your strengths and weaknesses lie. This gives you the chance to build on your strengths and develop strategies to minimize your weaknesses.

The critical thinking model

The critical thinking model is especially helpful for those learners for whom reflective thinking and writing seems at odds with the type of study they usually do—but it is, of course, a useful model for everyone. The critical thinking model contains a set of carefully ordered questions which move you, step-by-step, through a thinking process. First you are encouraged to be descriptive, then analytical, and finally evaluative. Each part of this process is important, but taken altogether, it provides a framework for questioning that constitutes reflection:

- **Descriptive:** Who was there?

- **Descriptive:** What did she say?

- **Descriptive:** What did I say?

- **Analytical/reflective:** Why did I respond in that way?

- **Analytical/reflective:** How did each of us feel as a result?

- **Analytical/reflective:** What if I had chosen my words more carefully?

- **Reflective/evaluative:** So what? Would that have made any difference to the outcome?

- **Reflective/evaluative:** Where can I go from here in my interactions with this person?