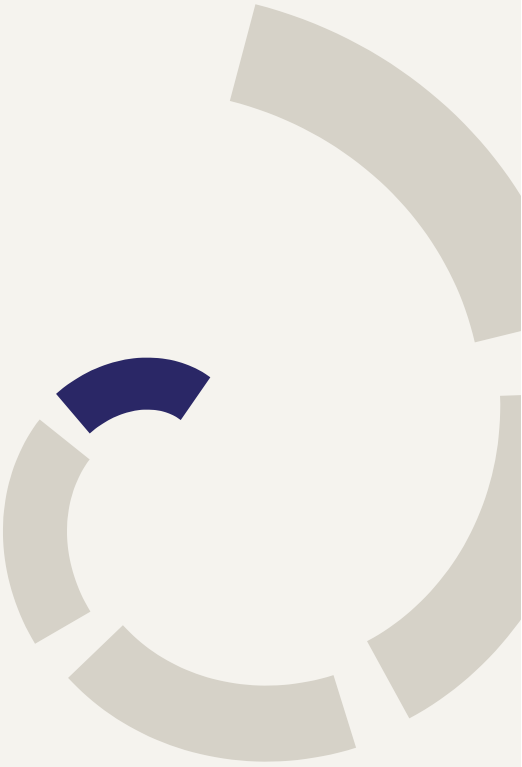
Reflection

How experience becomes the person you are next

Reflection decides whether an experience changes anything. In our sessions, it's the move people skip most often. This paper describes Reflection as a process in its own right, a skill that matures, and the bridge that sends every loop one step deeper.



Mohsin Memon

AFERR Research · www.aferr.org

05 REFLECTION

PROPOSED, WITH OBSERVED ELEMENTS

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CITE THIS WORK

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ABOUT THE EVIDENCE

AFERR is a conceptual framework. This paper links each idea to published research where that research exists, and labels every claim by how sure we are: Proposed, Observed, Tested or Reviewed. It does not claim that AFERR has been proven as a sequence in the brain, or that any phase lives in a single brain region. Observations from Evivve simulation sessions are reported as practice evidence, not as validated measurement.

LICENCE

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ORIGIN

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THE SERIES

00 The Loop (primer) · 01 Activation · 02 Forecasting · 03 Experimentation · 04 Realization · 05 Reflection

AT A GLANCE

Move 5 of 5 · Reflection

01 Reflection is where an experience becomes part of how you see the world.

02 It uses a quieter mode of the brain that is active when we turn inward.

03 It matures: from hindsight, to the moment, to foresight, to habit.

04 It works best running through all four other moves, not only at the end.

05 Done well, it questions the goal as well as the plan, so the next loop starts from a better place.

WORDS TO KNOW

Reflection
Choosing what the past will mean for the future.

Default mode network
Brain regions more active when attention turns inward.

Double-loop learning
Questioning the assumptions behind a plan, not only the plan.

Self-distancing
Looking at your own experience as if from a step away.

TRY THIS TODAY

At the end of today, answer one question in a sentence: what will I do differently tomorrow because of today?

The idea in one breath

After something happens, and after you work out why, there is one more step: deciding what it means for next time. That is **Reflection**. It needs a pause, a little distance, and an honest question. Do it, and the next time you start, you start from a better place. Skip it, and you only had an experience.

How to read this paper

This paper runs the loop it describes: Notice, Guess, Try, See, Keep. Each part opens with a short version simple enough for a child, then a longer version for anyone who wants depth.

1. Notice

SIMPLY PUT

At bedtime, a parent asks a child, "What was the best part of your day? And what was the hardest?" The child thinks for a moment. "The hardest part was when I didn't get picked for the team. I think next time I'll ask to play instead of waiting." The day is over. But in that quiet minute, it just became useful.

That is Reflection. Nothing new happened. Something old was turned into something for tomorrow.

GOING DEEPER

Reflection is the last named move of AFERR and the most quietly powerful. Activation starts the loop, Forecasting plans, Experimentation tests and Realization reveals. Reflection digests, connects and reorients. It turns raw experience into judgment, and insight into direction.

It is both a **process in its own right**, with its own work to do, and a **force that improves every other move** when it is practised on purpose. It is not daydreaming and it is not dwelling. It is active engagement with lived experience that shows what we truly value, where we fall back on habit, and what we are ready to become.

2. Guess

SIMPLY PUT

Guess. If two groups learn the same new job, and one group spends fifteen minutes at the end of each day writing down what they learned, while the other group just keeps practising for those fifteen minutes, which group gets better faster?

GOING DEEPER

Most people guess the group that keeps practising, because practice feels productive and reflection feels like a pause. In a field experiment with trainees at a large business process outsourcing company in India, the group that spent time at the end of each day reflecting on what they had learned performed better on a later test than a group that spent the same time on extra practice (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano & Staats, 2014). Reflection is not time away from learning. It is where learning is consolidated.

3. Try

SIMPLY PUT

Take two minutes now. Think of something that happened this week that bothered you a little. Write down three things: *What happened? What did it mean to me at the time? What could it mean for what I do next?*

GOING DEEPER

Notice the difference between the second and third answers. The second is a realization: how you made sense of it in the moment. The third is reflection: choosing what that meaning will do in the future. If the third was hard to write, that is normal. Most of us are well practised at the first two moves of hindsight and barely practised at the third.

A deeper version: write about the same event in the third person, using your own name. *"Priya felt dismissed when..."* Research on self-distancing suggests that stepping back from the "I" in this way helps people reflect on difficult experiences with more wisdom and less distress (Kross & Ayduk, 2017).

4. See

SIMPLY PUT

Your brain has a quiet mode it uses when you are not busy doing something. In that mode it sorts through what happened, joins it to what you already know, and works out what it means for you. That is why good ideas come in the shower and why things make more sense after a night's sleep. Reflection is using that mode on purpose. And here is the best part: when you reflect, you change what you will notice next time. The loop starts again, one step deeper.

4.1 What Reflection is

Reflection is the deliberate process of reviewing, evaluating and reinterpreting experience, emotion and behaviour, in order to generate insight and act with intention. It has four qualities.

- **Pause:** slowing the automatic response.
- **Distance:** stepping far enough back to see the shape of what happened.
- **Depth:** asking what it means and what follows from it.
- **Integration:** weaving the insight into how we will act next.

Its questions are simple and hard: *What is this moment trying to teach me? What part of myself am I seeing more clearly now?* It draws on metacognition, thinking about our own thinking (Flavell, 1979), on emotional regulation, and on the stories we tell about ourselves. The idea is old. John Dewey argued almost a century ago that experience turns into learning through reflective thought, the careful turning over of what happened (Dewey, 1933).

4.2 Reflection in the brain

When we turn inward, to remember, to imagine, to think about ourselves and others, a set of brain regions known as the **default mode network** becomes more active. It was first noticed because it was more active at rest than during outward-focused tasks (Raichle et al., 2001). It includes regions of the medial prefrontal cortex, linked to judging personal relevance, the posterior cingulate cortex, and connections with the hippocampus, central to memory. It is now understood to support self-generated thought, autobiographical memory and imagining the future (Andrews-Hanna, Smallwood & Spreng, 2014). *Evidence: well established; AFERR's description of Reflection as using this network on purpose is Proposed.*

Two practical points follow. First, rest is not idleness. Researchers have argued that constant outward attention may starve the inward processing that learning and identity depend on (Immordino-Yang, Christodoulou & Singh, 2012). Second, time matters. Memory continues to be consolidated after the experience, including during sleep (Diekelmann & Born, 2010). Some reflection happens in minutes. Some takes weeks, months or years.

4.3 Reflection as a skill that matures

Reflection usually begins as a reaction: something surprising happens and we look back at it. With practice it moves earlier, from hindsight towards foresight. AFERR describes four levels. *(Proposed, from practice.)*

LEVEL	WHEN REFLECTION HAPPENS	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Hindsight	After an unexpected outcome or realization.	*"Why did that go wrong?"*
In the moment	During action or decision-making.	*"Hang on, am I doing it again?"*
Foresight	Before action, shaping intent and attention.	*"Given what I know about myself, how do I want to go into this?"*
Habit	Built into how a person sees and acts.	Rarely said aloud. Visible in steadiness.

FIGURE 1

Reflection matures



Reflection usually starts after the fact and, with practice, moves earlier until it becomes a way of seeing. Schön (1983) separated reflection on action from reflection in action. (Levels Proposed, from practice.)

Donald Schön drew a similar line between reflection *on* action, looking back, and reflection *in* action, adjusting while you work (Schön, 1983). The AFERR levels add a further step, reflection *before* action, and a destination where it becomes a way of seeing.

Reflection starts with reviewing what happened. It matures into guiding what is about to happen.

4.4 Reflection inside every move

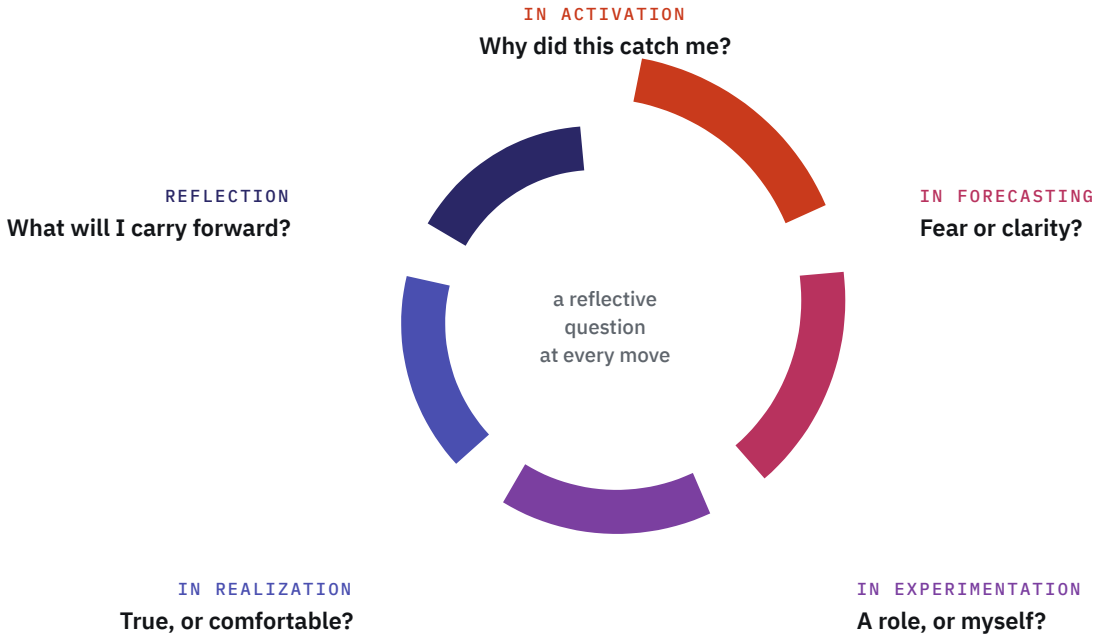
Reflection is the fifth move, but its real power appears when it runs through the other four.

- **In Activation:** *Why did this catch my attention? What old story got switched on?*
- **In Forecasting:** *Am I forecasting from fear or from clarity? Which past lesson is this plan built on?*
- **In Experimentation:** *Am I playing a role, or showing up as myself? What other choices do I have right now?*
- **In Realization:** *Is this conclusion true, or just comfortable? What else could this be about?*

Each phase stops being a task and becomes a place where awareness can grow.

FIGURE 2

Reflection inside every move



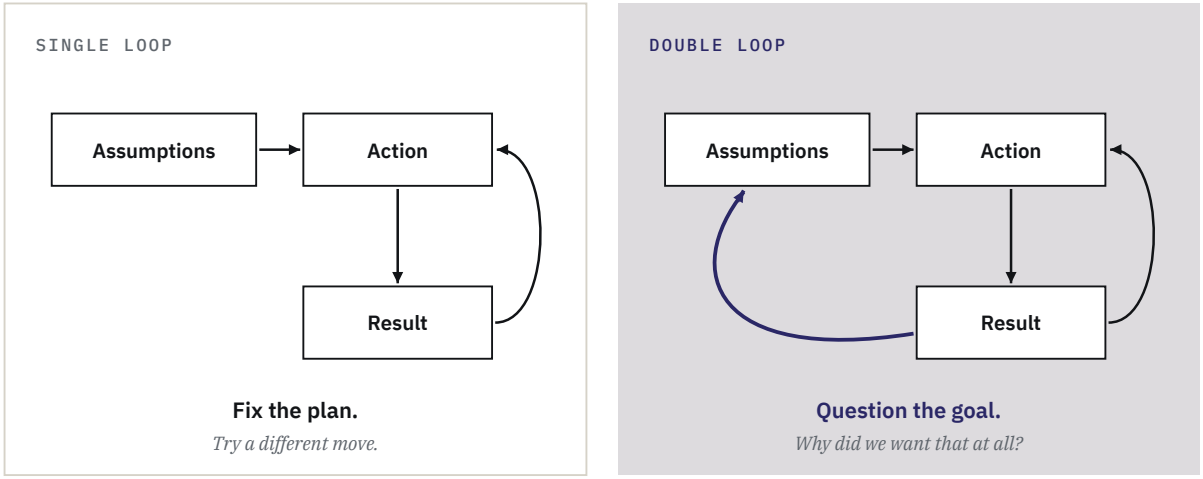
Reflection is the fifth move, but its real power shows when it runs through the other four.

4.5 Single-loop and double-loop

Chris Argyris and Donald Schön distinguished two kinds of learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In **single-loop learning**, we fix the action: the plan failed, so we try a different plan. In **double-loop learning**, we question the assumptions behind the plan: why did we think that was the goal at all? Reflection is what makes the second loop possible. It is also why the AFERR mark is drawn as a loop that never quite closes. Done well, reflection does not return us to the same starting point. It changes what we will notice next time. The next Activation is sharper. The loop goes one step deeper.

FIGURE 3

Single loop and double loop



Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguished fixing the action from questioning the assumptions behind it. Reflection is what opens the second loop.

4.6 Old practices, the same insight

Reflection has been treated across many traditions as more than a learning technique: as a discipline.

- In Sufi practice, *muraqabah* is watchful self-observation.
- In Buddhist practice, *vipassana* is insight that comes from close attention.
- In Greek philosophy, *gnōthi seauton*, "know thyself", was the starting point of a good life.

They arrive at one point: to reflect is to become conscious, and to become conscious is to be able to choose who you are.

5. Keep

● SIMPLY PUT

At the end of today, ask one question: *What will I do differently tomorrow because of today?* If you have an answer, you learned something. Keep it somewhere you will see it.

FIGURE 4

A loop that goes deeper, not round



A LOOP 1
A rushed meeting goes badly. You blame the agenda.

RZ LOOP 2
Next time you notice you were tired, not the agenda.

E LOOP 3
Now you book hard meetings for the morning, before it happens.

EACH TURN STARTS FROM A BETTER PLACE

Reflection changes what you notice next time, so the loop works more like a spiral. The same kind of event gets handled earlier and better each turn.

5.1 What Reflection needs

Reflection does best in conditions that are:

- **safe:** psychologically, emotionally and socially;
- **slowed:** with space between action and evaluation;
- **structured:** with prompts, frameworks or facilitated dialogue;
- **shared:** with peers or mentors who can hold up a mirror.

5.2 Practices that work

- **Journaling.** Writing about emotional experiences has been linked to benefits for wellbeing and understanding (Pennebaker, 1997). Short and regular beats long and rare.
- **Silent pauses** after an activity, before anyone speaks.
- **Dialogue circles** where each person speaks once before anyone responds.
- **Self-distancing:** writing or speaking about yourself in the third person.
- **Micro-questions** a facilitator can ask: *"What did you feel that you didn't say?" "What part of this surprised you?" "What do you want to remember about this moment?"*

The aim is to support reflection until it runs on its own.

5.3 For leaders and organisations

The quickest way to waste an organisation's experience is to cut reflection when the workload rises. That is usually when it is needed most. Build it into the rhythm of work: a short review at the end of every project, a question at the end of every meeting (*"What did we learn that changes what we do next?"*), and a place where lessons are written down and actually read. An organisation that reflects becomes harder to surprise.

5.4 How Reflection can be observed

Reflection can't be reduced to a score, but its presence can be noticed. *(Observation prompts, not a validated instrument.)*

SIGNAL	WHAT IT MAY SUGGEST
The story about an event changes	A new perspective is being taken in.
Talk turns to what happens next	Insight is being converted into intention.
Questions go beyond the outcome	Thinking about thinking is under way.
Emotional vocabulary grows	Inner awareness is sharpening.
A specific commitment is made and kept	Reflection is reaching behaviour.

5.5 Questions to keep

- When did you last change your mind about what an old experience meant?
- What is one assumption, not just one action, you would revisit from the past year?
- Where in your week is there a pause long enough for reflection to happen? If there isn't one, where could you make it?

5.6 Limits and open questions

- The four levels of reflective maturity are proposed from practice and need testing: are they distinct, are they ordered, and can people be helped to move between them?
- AFERR's use of default mode network research is descriptive. The network supports many kinds of inward thought, not only reflection.
- The claim that reflection improves the other four moves is central to AFERR and is supported by practice. It has not yet been tested in a controlled design.

5.7 What comes next

Nothing ends here. What we reflect on becomes what we notice next time. The loop begins again with **Activation**, Phase Paper 01, one step deeper than before.

We cannot control every moment. But we can reflect on each one, and in that reflection choose who we become.

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