Guide to Integrating Reflection into Field-Based Courses
Joy Amulya, Center for Reflective Community Practice
Department of Urban Studies and Planning, MIT

<u>Introduction: Reflection on community practice</u>

The act of reflection is the foundation of purposeful learning, particularly for experiential and practice-based learning. Reflection is an active process of reviewing an experience, either while it is going on or afterward. A key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one's own actions, thoughts, and feelings—in other words, examining an experience rather than just living it. Systematically exploring and bringing a sense of inquiry to an experience allows the learning from that experience to be surfaced. We can go through an event that is rich in possibilities for learning, but without reflection, the event stays at the level of experience. Reflection is a tool to support learning from experience, whether that is the experience of a meeting, a project, a disaster, a success, a relationship, or any other internal or external event, before, during or after it has occurred.

In this guide, we will refer to *practice* as an individual or group's intentional process of doing community-related work. In the section I, we outline a set of three purposes that we see reflection serving in field-based courses, pointing out that instructors may choose to focus on 1-2 of those purposes. In section II, we describe a set of reflection tools and the general utility of each. The third section then matches a subset of the tools with each of the three purposes for reflection. Finally, the fourth section describes the conceptual approach we take to reflection, so that the common rationale underlying any of the tools is explained.

<u>I. Purposes for Reflection in Community-Based Courses</u>

We have distinguished three purposes that reflection can be directed toward in a community-based course: project evolution, practitioner development, and engaging community knowledge. Each defines a particular kind of learning. By making these distinctions, we hope that instructors can prioritize how they wish to integrate reflection.

Project evolution

This purpose is aimed generating learning about the larger issues and challenges that are present in the particular area and setting of community work in which a project is embedded. By looking at how a project concretely unfolds over time and the experience of those who are involved in it, the larger set of issues and challenges can be named and grounded in vivid and specific details. In this case, reflection is aimed at generating learning from the analysis of those details.

Ideally, this learning happens at the collective as well as individual level (although this can be used for individual projects as well). Individuals with different perspectives or vantage points on the project contribute their views on specific events or aspects of the project. The collective reflection process seeks to connect these multiple perspectives to one another, in addition to examining how the larger issues and challenges recur in different ways at different points along the way. It also helps generate larger inquiry questions that are potentially important for the project as it moves forward or for the implementation of the project in the future.

Reflection on project progress is not itself aimed at the purpose of *evaluating* how well or how poorly the project is going. Instead, the purpose is *understanding* what can be learned from the evolution of the project.

Recommended method: Critical moments reflection (see Section II below)

Practitioner development

This purpose is oriented toward the individual student's development as a community practitioner. However, the reflection work itself can include a collective component as a support to the individual learning process. The reflection process asks students to focus on how specific experiences are informing them about their practice, either by challenging them, providing an insight, provoking a question, etc. Again, this purpose is not evaluative per se. The end result is understanding the learning that has taken place during the course that informs students about themselves as community practitioners. This learning includes identifying questions or areas of learning that will support their continued development.

Recommended methods: Inquiry-based reflection; journaling on struggles & breakthroughs (see Section II)

Engaging community knowledge

Most project teams must engage with the knowledge that community residents or practitioners have about their community or their work, but it is most often not effective to ask direct questions to access this knowledge. The difficulty is not only related to the need for mutual trust and respect before it makes sense to ask a lot of questions, but also the fact that sometimes the most important and sophisticated knowledge is embedded in action and not available as conscious knowledge. Such tacit knowledge is best revealed through stories and other experience-based accounts. This provides the opportunity to ask reflective questions aimed at supporting a community practitioner or resident to describe how she thinks about and has experienced situations related to the project. Asking about someone's experience and way of thinking also demonstrates respect and interest in their knowledge and thus supports relationship-building.

Closely related to the issue of accessing tacit knowledge from community practitioners is the need for students to identify their own tacit knowledge about issues or situations related to the project. Only by examining previous experiences that relate to these issues or situations will it be possible for students to know what mental models they are bringing to the table and where they comes from.

Recommended methods: Critical moments reflection; story-based interviewing

II. General Reflection Tools

This section contains a general description of a number of reflection tools we have used in generating reflection on community practice. These tools are general and can be adapted to a variety of different situations. For example, critical moments reflection works great for a team doing reflection on the progress of a project. However, it can also be adapted to work as an individual reflection exercise, or used for reflection by a multi-stakeholder group. Section III outlines the tools that we think would work best for each of the three purposes described above.

Critical moments reflection
Critical moments reflection moves from experiences to articulating issues and questions. In critical moments reflection, individuals identify events, experiences, activities, or any other specific occurrence (even something *not* happening) that stand out as significant in the evolution of a specific area of work from their perspective. This provides an opportunity for the collective (team or full group) to take note of similarities and differences in the moments that are identified by people who have varying perspectives on the work. Then the collective picks 2-3 critical moments from the list as the ones it feels are most important to examine more closely. The stories of those moments are recounted, if relevant, from more than one perspective. The analysis of the critical moment story focuses on the issues and challenges illustrated by the moment, and any deeper questions it raises.

Critical moments reflection can also be done as an individual exercise, either by doing all of the steps in a journal, or reporting out moments to a small group and getting their help in the analysis step.

Critical moments reflection can be done at key junctures or time intervals in a project.

> Step 1: Naming the moments. We start by asking individuals to list those *specific* moments (events, experiences, turning points, frustrations, etc.) they have experienced as most significant within a particular area of their work or a project. In listing the moments, the moments are named but not described in full. Even in a collective process, we often have folks jot their moments down individually and then have each person report out their list. The most important thing is that these are specific, concrete moments, no matter if they last minutes, hours, days, or months. (For example: "building a relationship with the community" is not specific; "going to the first community meeting" is, and so is "the moment in the first meeting when I didn't know what to say.")

> Step 2: (optional) Examine contrasts. If these individuals are doing critical moments reflection as members of a group, the contrasts in the sets of moments that are reported from different perspectives in the work is often very interesting and can provoke a powerful learning discussion.

> Step 3: Select moment(s) to analyze. The next step is to narrow down to a subset of critical moments, to choose one or more to analyze in depth. This decision is usually based on which moment(s) will likely produce the learning that is most important to those involved (for example, they may have thought beforehand about questions or issues they hope to learn about and choose moments that hold learning for those questions). For example, it could be those moments that shaped the course of the work most powerfully. It could also be those that involved the biggest struggles. Or those that relate to a particular issue.

> Step 4: Analysis. For the selected critical moment(s), the story of the moment is told (from more than one perspective if there are multiple perspectives on the event), and then there is an analysis of the moment—what shifted, why, what led to the moment, what happened as a result. It is through the analysis that the meaning of the moment to the person(s) who experienced it is brought out and explored. The goal of the analysis is to become aware of why particular moments are experienced as significant and to examine the nature of their significance, allowing issues challenges in the work to be better articulated and understood, and often revealing important deeper questions.

> Step 5: Summary. As a summary to the analysis of one or more moments, the session closes by articulating what stands out from the analysis, what issues, challenges, and questions have been articulated and probed. An issues document can be maintained to hold the issues and the way they have manifested themselves at a particular point in the project.

Inquiry-driven reflection

Inquiry-driven reflection starts with articulating issues and questions and moves to examining specific experiences that have the potential to illuminate them. Individuals or groups develop a set of questions that speak to current critical issues in a project, the development of one's practice, or particular area of work. The top 1-3 priority questions are chosen. These inquiry questions are used in two ways. On one hand, they are kept in mind during specific experiences that they are relevant to. This provides a focused lens on those experiences. Second, they are returned to in journaling or group dialogue, to bring specific experiences or practice moments to bear on the inquiry questions. The result is a set of experiential "data" that address each priority question.

Inquiry-driven reflection is well-suited to individual reflection but is also effective for teams. It is less straightforward for use by a multi-stakeholder group.

> Step 1: Articulating inquiry questions. Inquiry questions can relate to any area of the project or aspect of community work. They represent questions that are important for advancing the understanding of an individual or group. While it is true that some people know their questions right away, it can help to do journaling about difficult issues or situations. We recommend that people go back over their journaling with a highlighter pen and mark the "hot spots"—anything that stands out, including questions, areas of struggle, contradictions, etc. For each hot spot, try to name the issue or question that it is raising. Then frame any issues in terms of the question that is important to address about that issue.

> Step 2: Prioritize questions. Select 1-3 questions that are highest priority.

> Step 3: Holding the question/reflection in action. Keep these questions in a prominent place. Before going into a situation where they are relevant, review the questions. Take moments during the situation to remember the question(s). View the situation from the perspective of one of the questions. It can work well for members of a team to each hold a different question when going into the same situation. Take notes as it is possible. Follow up with journaling or field notes about the situation. The point is not to do an analysis of the situation in terms of the question, but to be aware of the question during the experience and to journal during or afterward based on that awareness.

> Step 4: Journaling. When journaling, describe in detail a particular situation or practice moment that seems related to one of the inquiry questions. This can also be done in dialogue with someone taking good notes.

> Step 5: Analysis. Once a number of journaling or dialogue sessions have taken place, collect up the reflection material related to each question. The focus of the analysis is on how the question is manifested in each of the situations or practice moments that were described, and how the set of situations or practice moments address the question. The analysis may result in a shift in the question. The data often point to key issues related to the inquiry question.

Step 5: Summary. The reflection cycle is completed by identifying the results of the analysis that stand out as most significant. It can be helpful to record these points of analysis in a document.

Journaling/Interviews

Certain kinds of experiences create particularly powerful opportunities for learning through reflection, and journaling and one-on-one interviews are general tools for facilitating this kind of reflection. Below we describe a set of general reflection activities that can be done through journaling, interviewing, or even in a small group to surface learning from community practice. In most cases, it is more effective to ground the reflection in story ("tell about a time in **this area of work** when …").

Deconstructing challenges/struggles: (past or present) Examination of a struggle helps name the parts of what makes a challenge in this work; can look at how are challenges/struggles can be used for gaining information about doing the work.

Exploring breakthroughs in action or thinking: This looks at where something really worked in the work, which reveals the learning that took place, the theory of what leads to success, and importantly, where excitement/fulfillment are in the work.

Examine dilemmas: These are clashes between a value and possible action. Articulating a specific dilemma and exploring it allows learning, by naming and analyzing the discrepancy and using it to get a clearer articulation of values.

Analyze messy problems: These are problems that seem to have no right answer—because they are unspecific or too vague or complex. Working through them (describing them, naming their components) brings out reflection on the limits of available knowledge and can emphasize finding strategies for solving & evaluating such problems.

Problem solving: Problem solving allows for conducting an analysis at different levels (issues at stake, procedure used to solve, paradigm or mindset governing the approach to the problem). In this way, we can articulate the tacit theory we hold in the work, question beliefs, and build new understanding of practice.

Examine occasions when doubts/fears arise: Looking at doubts and fears is similar to exploring challenges, but emphasizes accepting the reality of the unknown and how that is used in the work and learning about the work.

Explore occasions of feeling disappointment or letdown: When the outcome of action fell short or is perceived as mistake. Can be used to understand and articulate what the metric of success is; also to acknowledge the truth of feeling disappointed rather than having to hold a constant positive attitude. Helps articulate what is fulfillment; how things "should" be; how this can be used in learning.

Take stock: Revisit inquiry questions or goals/intentions for outcomes in the work; where each is and what next steps are. Helps to also look at feelings, hopes, fears.

Integration: Following a complex practice moment or extended experience, record satisfactions, dissatisfactions, learnings, and surprises. Then identify helping and hindering forces that either kept things on track or got in the way.

Unstructured journaling: Journal with as much detail as possible about a project or area of work. Can be followed by highlighting "hot spots" and writing margin notes the issues presented by those parts.

Dialogue

Dialogue can be focused in the same ways as journaling (see above), or by an inquiry question. The central guideline for dialogue is that the participants of the group are primarily focused on understanding each other's contributions and working toward the goal of building a new inclusive understanding, and not on refining arguments and positions (the latter is the aim of discussion). To do this, it is important for each person's turn to link explicitly to the one before, by looking at implications, elaborating, or making a connection. Participants work together to build a new understanding of an issue or topic out of the different components of each person's thinking. True dialogue is relatively rare, but it can yield remarkable results.

III. Fitting Tools to Purposes

Purposes:	*Suggested Tool(s)*	*Notes*
Project evolution	Collective critical moments reflection	Can be done by full group or subgroups with initial individual journaling
Practitioner development	Inquiry-based reflection using journaling	Analysis can be done with partner or small group
Engaging community knowledge	Critical moments reflection; story-based interviewing	Best to set frame for reflection to specific period of time, event, or issue.

Using critical moments reflection for learning from project evolution

We recommend collective critical moments reflection by teams and/or the whole group in generating learning from looking at the evolution of a project.

Setup: Individuals or teams who play different roles or bring different perspectives to the work start by making a list of critical moments that stand out

during a specific period of work (and if relevant, within a specific area of the work).

Report out: Critical moments by each person or team are named (not fully described yet) and the group can reflect on similarities and differences.

Story and Analysis: Whoever is doing the analysis (sub-team or full group) collectively decides which 1-3 moments to focus on. The choice is based on either which moments seem most important to the project, or which ones seemed most problematic. Then the story of the moment is told by those closest to it. It's helpful to tell the story before doing the analysis. It takes a minimum of 15-20 minutes to analyze one moment. The analysis aims at articulating why the moment was significant, what conditions gave rise to it, what possibilities it closed off or opened up, how different people thought about and experienced the moment, what larger issues or challenges are illustrated in the moment. The goal is to both help people see how issues manifest in concrete situations, and how concrete situations can be viewed from the perspective of larger issues.

Variations: This is an effective strategy for generating reflection with community participants. If the group doing the reflection is relatively large (for example, including students and community groups), it helps to break into sub-groups for some of the steps. However, it is usually helpful for a facilitator to guide the analysis.

Frequency: Recommended at key junctures or set time intervals during a project and at the end. When done with community, can be used at the outset of a project to facilitate reflection on an area of work that is related closely to the project.

Using inquiry-based reflection for generating learning about practitioner development
We recommend journaling as an effective means of promoting learning related to practitioner development. Using inquiry-based reflection supports people in identifying their questions and accumulating accounts of experiences that they can analyze in terms of their questions. It can work well to support the journaling process by using occasional exchanges with a partner or small group, where each person names one of their questions and gets help in analyzing one or more of the experiences being brought to bear on that question.

Setup: Each person formulates questions about his or her development as a practitioner. The process of articulating questions can be supported by journaling using one of the general techniques, such as describing struggles, dilemmas, or breakthroughs, and to follow up by using a highlighter to identify hot spots (emotions, questions, central elements of struggle). Usually these areas suggest issues that can then be formulated as questions. The questions emphasize that practitioner development is a process of seeking learning about those areas of practice where development is needed.

Process: There needs to be a structure that supports people in periodically returning to their journals and writing about experiences that relate to their questions, such as an assignment or in-class time to write (10 minutes works well). It also helps to ask people to name the questions for their practice that they will be holding going into a particular situation, and to remind them to bring their journals to make notes during and after that experience.

Analysis: It is also helpful to provide a structured opportunity for the analysis of what people are writing in their journals, either as a journaling activity in itself (again for 10 minutes) or with a partner. This involves returning to one of the inquiry questions, and naming the experiences and practice moments that have been written about in relation to that question. The focus is on what the experiences and practice moments speak to about the question, and whether the question should be revised in light of the "data" from the experiences.

Frequency: This can vary from being a weekly or daily practice, to being scheduled at longer intervals. We recommend supporting this kind of reflection not only through frequent reminders about journaling, but also one or more scheduled partner-sharing activities.

Using critical moments and story-based interviewing for engaging community knowledge

We recommend following the basic outline of critical moments reflection above, with a suitable non-technical introduction to community participants explaining the importance of sharing stories about important moments in their work.

For story-based interviewing, students would schedule a conversation with a community practitioner or resident, and ask to hear about either general critical moments or focus on one or more of the suggestions under journaling/interviews (such as struggles, breakthroughs, etc.). The focus is on learning how the interviewee thinks about and understands their work and the issues that bear on it.

Setup: The first step is to identify the issue or area of work to focus on. Students first journal about or generate through discussion a description of their own mental models related to that set of issues. The importance of doing this is that they can then be aware of the framework they bring to the issue and to not confining the conversation with community within that framework.

Process: Bring a simple plan of asking about moments that stand out or specific struggles, breakthroughs, etc. and what kinds of reflective questions will be used to follow up. At the end of the conversation, it is important to leave time for each of you to reflect on what stands out from the conversation. Sometimes this is where you learn the most from someone about their tacit knowledge—after they've told a story and talked about it.

Analysis: The followup questions to the stories that are told are the heart of the analysis. This is where the community practitioner or resident can be asked how they connect different events, what was important to them, and other questions that support them in talking about the meaning of the experience.

Frequency: This is usually targeted around specific needs for engaging community knowledge. It builds relationship when it is done throughout a project, rather than just at the beginning.

IV. Concepts and Recommendations

Below we list some of the basic principles underlying any of the reflection tools we use.

- *Setting a frame for reflection* helps people access specific experiences, for example, an area of work, question, situation, etc.
- *Allowing individuals to connect with their own thinking* before they are asked to share it in a group is beneficial to the quality of both individuals' and the group's reflection process.
- *Reflection by an individual or small group should be considered private*; they make the decision of what to share with a larger group.
- *Get people to first generate a list of events or experiences* that relate to an issue or question to get possibilities out. Once they do this, they can make a conscious choice about which one to reflect on in depth
- *Telling the details of an experience or practice moment* is important to do before analysis. Once this reflective account has been generated, the focus can turn to analysis. Analyzing along the way can keep important details of the experience from coming out.
- *There are two basic approaches to reflection*: moving from experience to questions, and from questions to experience. One or the other can work better at different times, or for different groups of people.
- *Use existing structures for reflection* whenever possible (a scheduled meeting, etc.), rather than adding it as a "new" thing. It generally can complement many other activities. However, it is important to bracket reflection as a distinct activity in its own right – it is not the same as planning, problem solving, etc.
- Similarly, *many project assignments can be adapted* to include a reflection component aimed at one of the three purposes