

# Learning through Life

Reflecting on experience - an illustrated Guide



Jenny Willis

Illustrations by Kiboko HachiYon

## Lifewide learning and personal development

We learn and develop through all the experiences, good or bad, that make up our life. Our lifelong learning is developed through the continuous journey we all make 'from cradle to grave'. The idea of lifewide learning draws attention to the fact that this is not a single linear journey. At any point in our lives we are involved in many experiences simultaneously and all of them help us learn and develop. Lifewide learning helps us appreciate the richness of our lives as opportunities and resources for helping us be and become the people we want to be.

Lifewide learning and personal development encompasses formal and informal learning in the classroom, on work placement, in paid or unpaid part-time work, community service and other voluntary activities, through travel and exposure to other cultures, participation in sporting and artistic activities, in the Duke of Edinburgh Award and potentially in all aspects of our life. Much of this learning is intentional. For example, when we want to learn to drive a car we take lessons, we go for practice drives with family and friends who have already have a license and we swat up on the theory, we may even watch how to drive video clips on YouTube. But quite a lot of our learning is a bi-product of us doing something without thinking about it. For example, we might choose to take a walk, but what happens on that walk and what we take note of and remember will only emerge through the experience itself.

After doing something, particularly if it was out of the ordinary, we often think about it again. We call this reflection and it is important to enable us to develop self-awareness of who we are. It helps us appreciate our personal values, our qualities and dispositions, what we know and don't know, and what we can and can't do. Sometimes the experience is enjoyable but sometimes it is very uncomfortable as we tussle with a dilemma or some aspect of ourselves that we are not totally happy with. But developing this capacity to reflect on situations, to challenge yourself and to learn from your experiences, is something that is well worth trying to do. Because this will help you learn to become a better person and eventually it will help you become the person you want to be.

The purpose of the Lifewide Development Award is to encourage you to develop this capability and willingness to reflect on and learn from the experiences you have every day of your life. This illustrated Guide contains examples of stories told as part of a reflective process through which the person is learning more about themselves.

## How do we reflect?

So much of our life involves dealing with new situations and problems for which there are no text book answers. But we can use our experience as a resource for learning by thinking about situations deeply and reflectively in order to make sense and create meaning.

In writing about your personal experiences, reflecting on what happened and how you felt, it is important to think critically and to try and analyse actions, feelings, responses and emotions in a way that helps you to benefit and grow from the experience. All too often when writing about life experiences we simply describe the event or perhaps how we felt about it, without analysing why we or other people did what we did, or the reasons for why we felt the way we did.

One of the most popular methods of reflecting critically takes us through 6 stages<sup>1</sup>, from

1. simple description of the experience
2. expressing feelings and thoughts about the experience
3. evaluating what was good and bad about the experience
4. analysis, making sense of the experience
5. conclusion about what else you could have done in the circumstances
6. action plan for the future in similar circumstances

Ideally, you should aim to include each stage in your reflection. Here is an example of one experience, but reflected on at increasingly analytical levels of thought.

**1 Purely descriptive.** "I went to a staff meeting today which we were all told to attend. It was about job changes but my team had not discussed this so it was a waste of time. Everyone was talking at once and going off the subject."

**2 Descriptive with some feelings about the experience.** "I went to a staff meeting today and found it very exasperating to say the least. My team have not made any decisions about job changes and I am really stressed as we have to give a presentation soon. I just got fed up in the end - there was really no point in my being there. What a waste of time, I should have gone to the pub instead."

**3 Descriptive with feelings and evaluation of the experience.** "I went to a staff meeting today and found it very exasperating to say the least. My team have not made any decisions about job changes and I am really stressed as we have to give a presentation soon. I had some ideas which I really tried to put across but they just kept interrupting, going on about how well the Test Match is going. I just got feed up in the end there was really no point in my being there."

**4 Analysis of the experience.** "I think what annoyed me about the staff meeting was that there was no attempt by the team to reach a decision. They don't seem to share my concern with deadlines or realise the importance of keeping focused. I was also frustrated that they wouldn't let me get a word in edgeways, as if my views don't count."

**5 Conclusion regarding the experience.** "I found the total lack of any attempt at decision making by the team really exasperating. I guess because I am a little fixated about deadlines, it concerns me more than it does others that we are rapidly running out of time before we have to present our findings. I had come up with a great idea to get us moving forward then failed to make myself heard over the two or three loud members of the team that can be quite intimidating when they are together. I am actually a bit shy and had I not been so stressed about the approaching deadline I probably would not have said anything at all."

**6 Learning from the experience for future action.** "Because meeting deadlines is important to me I found today's team meeting banter exasperating. I was also very annoyed with myself for not being more assertive in putting forward my ideas which I am sure would have progressed our decision making. With such a self-assured group it takes a lot of effort for someone like me who is much less self-confident to get my point across, and my natural inclination in such circumstances is to withdraw into the background and let them get on with it. Having sat and thought about it I think my strategy will be to email each of the team and suggest that at the next meeting we go around the table and get ideas from each person before we start discussing options and those with the loudest voices take over."

## **Making your informal learning explicit**

At the end of this process of thinking about your informal learning in this way you, and recording your thoughts, you will have made your informal learning visible to yourself and others. This process of thinking about and recording your reflections on your experiences and what you have learnt is the core learning process that underlies the Lifewide Development Award.

The award also encourages you to reflect on key aspects of personal development namely:

- The knowledge you develop to deal with situations
- Your creativity and resourcefulness to deal with situations
- Your ability to communicate appropriately and effectively in different situations
- Your awareness of the cultural dimensions of the situations you are in
- Your empathy and compassion in your relationships
- Your ability to work productively with, and lead, others
- Your awareness of behaving ethically and with social responsibility

The underpinning belief is that by reflecting critically on our experiences we become aware of our personal values, gain in self-confidence and can take control of who we are and aspire to be.

In order to demonstrate the richness of lifewide learning and the reflective process it supports, the following section contains a number of personal stories<sup>ii</sup>. Each is compelling in its own right, and the diversity of experiences reminds us of the uniqueness of our lives. Whereas in previous collections we have illustrated each learning dimension by drawing on a range of narratives, here, we have preserved the integrity of each story and allowed them to stand as examples of the complexity of human experience. We are indebted to the narrators (whose names have been changed) whose words feature in this selection and hope you are inspired by them. When you read them perhaps you can reflect on which of the key aspects of personal development you feel the story is demonstrating. We shall give you our response to this question in the concluding section.



# Life Stories

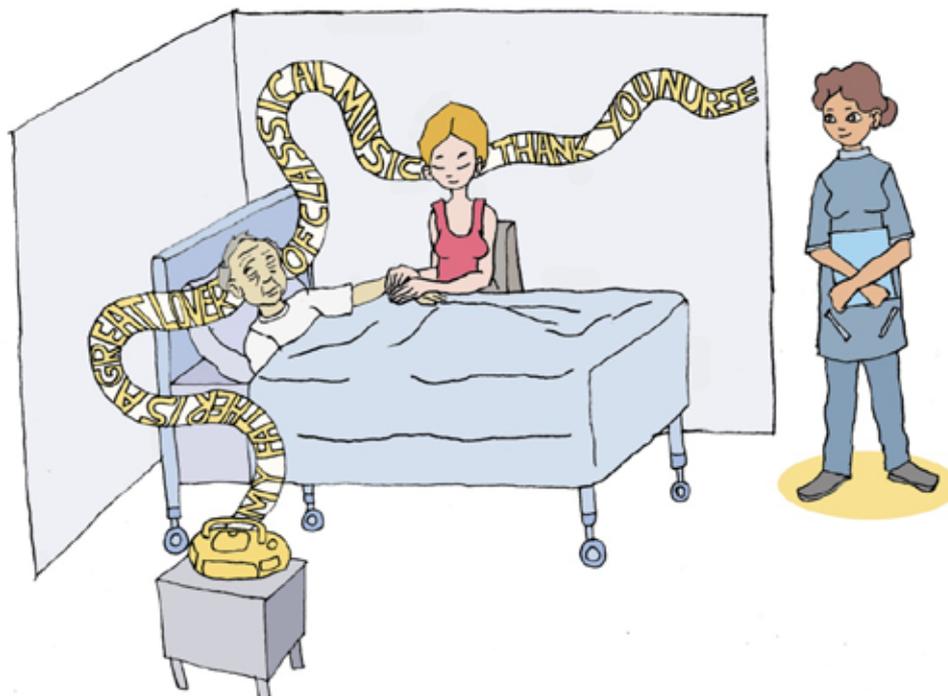
## **'This is not a sob-story' - drawing positivity from tragedy**

Sally had just begun a Master's degree in the south of England when first her mother, then her father, became terminally ill and died in her distant Scotland. Before relating her harrowing experiences, she wrote, 'I do not want this to appear to be a sob-story as it is anything but this.'

Suddenly this nurse practitioner found herself on the other end of health care and, despite the physical and emotional exhaustion of travelling alternate weekends to Scotland, she somehow managed to draw on her experience to the benefit of her personal and professional development. One particular incident stands out for her:

Watching my parents cope with their deterioration with good humour and pleasantness to all around them, made me proud of them and I would like to think I too could behave like this. It is certainly a skill which could be applied to many difficult situations and is also relevant to many situations one finds oneself in while nursing.

A vital thing I realised during the course of my parents' illnesses was the importance of the way in which the health professionals treated both them and myself. Even though I am a trained nurse, I found myself hanging on to every word they said and feeling so grateful for and noticing every little kindness. I mentioned to a nurse one day while my father was unconscious, that he had been a great lover of classical music throughout his life. When I visited the next day there was a CD player playing classical music next to his bed. I will never know if my father was aware or not of this, but it meant a huge amount to me and made me feel that the staff really cared about both him and me.



True to her aim of not writing a 'sob story', Sally concludes her narrative with these typically inspiring words:

I hope that this account has demonstrated that good things and valuable learning can come out of difficult situations. Whilst I would rather my parents were still alive, their deaths made me grow as a person and taught me valuable skills such as increased empathy, understanding, problem sharing, time-management, marathon running and the associated 'head-filing' and the realisation that with the right attitude most hurdles can be successfully jumped over.

## How to get the girl – and far more!

Robert begins his reflective story:

My story is the result of a girl ... Not just any girl but the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life.

This love story turned out to be an account of how his life was completely transformed. Although in the final year of his course, he became involved in fund raising, so that he could be in contact with the girl, who was the events co-ordinator for the student RAG<sup>iii</sup> festival. Serendipitously, this led to his being recruited as a fund-raiser for a charity which donated to Cancer Research. He admits,

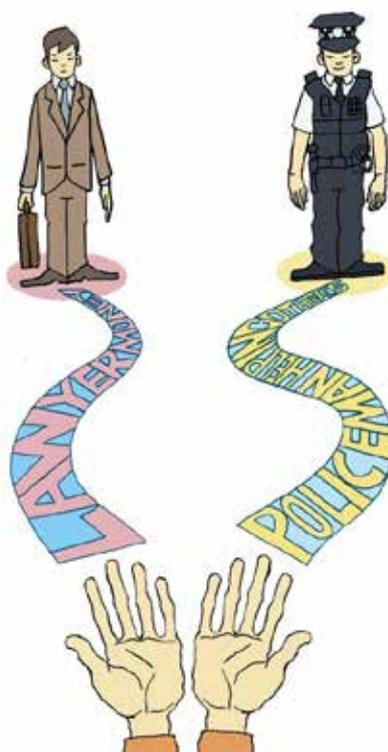
Originally sceptical (it being my third year with important exams pending, I decided to really push myself to see if it was something I would enjoy and it turned out to be the best decision I ever made.

Robert was knocking on doors, talking about cancer from a theoretical perspective, but frequently found the people he was speaking to had personal experience of the disease. He recognises the profound impact this had on him:

For a Law student whose aim in life was to work for a law firm in London and earn a lot of money, talking to people who had lost husbands and children really hit home to me the real importance in life of family and happiness in what you do. After my time spent sharing stories with people on the street I suddenly found it hard to relate to the importance of dividends in Company Law lectures or how to sue people best in Family Law.

As a result of this experience Robert 'completely changed the trajectory' of his life and planned to become a police officer. He explains,

This is a goal awakened in me by my time talking to people from all walks of life and feeling as though I really want to communicate and help people every day for the rest of life. My time at Home Fundraising further motivated me to move out of my comfort zone by giving me an urge to want to communicate, resulting in my successful application for a job teaching English in China for 6 months.



He describes his increase in self-confidence which has been reflected in higher grades for his presentations. He believes

Constantly operating outside of your comfort zone is the only way you can truly grow as a person. It is the greatest ability of all to show the courage to push your boundaries and can lead to the greatest results as you learn to stretch your capabilities.

And he was not only speaking of the beautiful girl, though he won her, too!

## **Learning from every single moment of your life**

Lifewide learning means learning from every aspect of life, and making the most of the moments that come your way (...) It is learning from every single moment of your life.

This definition of lifewide learning is offered by Jamila an undergraduate student, who recounts her experience of leaving her native Pakistan to study in England. The decision flew in the face of so many traditions and would bring her to a vastly different culture. And the difficulties were not confined to her alone, as she explains:

When I decided to come to the UK, my extended family was vehemently opposed to the idea of a girl studying abroad. It wasn't expected. In the society I grew up in, girls were meant to be kept near family, trained since birth for adjusting to their new homes after their wedding that would take place in the distant future, forced to conform to the identities set for women in general, and not allowed to question. However, my parents had taught me to think freely and act sensibly. I stuck by my decision to study abroad, and fortunately, my parents supported me. Through taunts and accusations of spoiling their daughter, they stuck by the decision I had made. I watched and learned. Learned and started to defend my decision and my opinions. It took a month for the transition to complete from a carefree individual to a more sensible person.

The courage she and her parents displayed was rewarded and validated by her ability to retain her values whilst being open to acquiring new ones. She acknowledges the challenges she encountered:

Overcoming the loneliness, making new friends, fighting with myself to keep learning while maintaining my values, challenging my ideas and re-forming them, accepting where I was wrong and learning to embrace criticism, adjusting to the new cultures, hearing criticism about the country I was raised in and discussing it calmly, being open to religious discussions and balancing life in a new environment, all these are accolades for me.



Jamila compares her experiences in two diverse cultures, without any hint of regret or criticism of either. Instead, she draws on the personal growth these contrasting societies have encouraged, and expresses the true essence of lifewide learning.

It is not just one moment or experience that made me learn. Who I am and what I learnt is defined by all the actions that I did, all the moments that I treasure, all the little things in life and all the people I met. To highlight one experience would be an injustice. All the experiences were unique and helped me shape who I am as a person.

### **You can't choose who you work with**

Rashmi describes herself as 'a Yorkshire bred girl' for whom going to London was an adventure. Only later do we discover that she 'grew up as a closeted, Indian lesbian with a severe case of middle child syndrome.' This mix inevitably challenged many values at cultural and individual levels and unsurprisingly had immense emotional impact on her.

She gained much self-confidence from being successful at an interview for a work placement position in London. In fact, she felt so welcome that she 'accidentally came out' (as a lesbian), during the interview, 'the most empowering mistake I have made in my young working life.'

In the months before taking up her placement, Rashmi lost two close members of her family and witnessed her distraught mother's grief. Of this she writes:

I vowed never to attend a funeral again as no one should hear those screams or see what I saw. I don't feel sorry for myself, though, it's all a learning curve. 2010 was a never ending learning curve, one I have chosen to empower me.

Like other narrators, she consciously sought to turn difficulty to positive learning experience. She pulled herself out of apathy and set about professionalising the business for which she was working. She enjoyed the sense of success and

I realised that I wanted this – the hard work with big benefits, a strictly black, grey and white dress code and a calendar with planned events pencilled in.



She recognised that her income allowed her to take care of her family – by then, both her parents had lost their jobs. Sadly, Rashmi's bubble was popped and, with excruciating honesty, she describes how she coped with the situation:

I soon encountered another harsh reality – *you can't choose who you work with*. My supervisor had become increasingly rude and intrusive with his questions, once even telling me to tell my "girlfriend to pull her finger out" when I had expressed a desire to be at my rented flat helping her with household chores (I soon learned that separating home and work life is vital). I would stay awake late just to make the most of my time with someone who cared for me, dread the next day and cry on my commute knowing that I was going to face a sexist man who would belittle me and treat me like a slave in the office. I purposely walked into people on the commute home hoping someone

would turn around and hit me so I could do the same back and rid myself of the anger and turmoil.

The bullying resulted in her losing all her self-confidence and having to seek help. Recalling the words of other narrators, Rashmi says

My life is not a sob story, it is Lifewide Learning to me. It has taken me a quarter of a year to get my confidence back but I will never forget or regret 2010 (...) Embrace adversity for it's not whether you fall, it's whether you get back up.

If any reinforcement of her message were necessary, she summarises:

2010 = 3 deaths, 1 baby, a prison trial, both parents being made redundant, a bully at work and because of it all the strongest Me I have ever known.

## Standing out from others

In his story, narrator John says, 'the concept of lifewide learning helps me to individualise myself and stand out from others.' His means of achieving this is to engage in a wide variety of activities. As a very young writer, his experiences naturally draw on his time at university and school.

John gives us a clear insight into his studies, work and extra-curricular pursuits, but patently takes most pride in setting up his own company:

University is one small fragment of my life. On a Wednesday night, I work at Tesco. I transferred to the Guildford store for university. I was required to change departments and fit in to a different way of working, but this gave me a larger perspective of the company. Not everything is work at university, and I'm sure many people know it! I love to socialise with friends, and yes, by socialising, I mean clubbing and house parties. Nevertheless, it's a valuable experience, and a great way to escape from all the pressure and deadlines, for a while. My most valuable experience however is Computer LogicX, my company.

John demonstrates a resourceful, enterprising spirit behind the establishment of this company. Apparently good ideas for raising the funds needed to set up a company proved unrealistic until a Eureka moment:

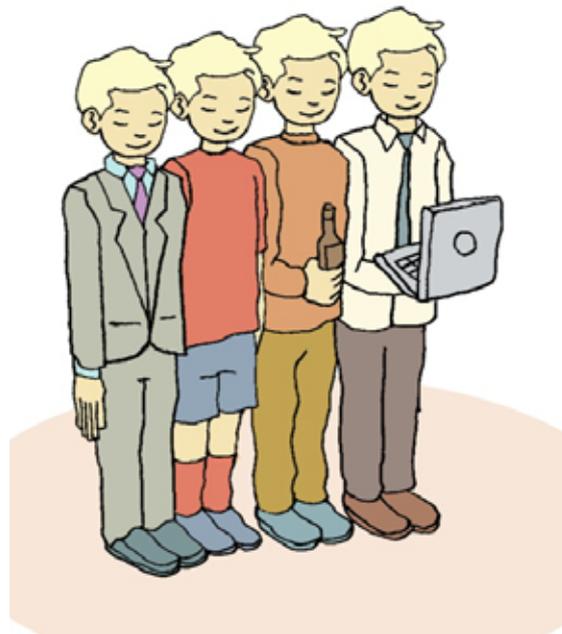
In December 2009, we had a revolutionary idea. We wanted to make iPhone apps! This was perfect for us as we both loved software development. We decided if we were going to make this happen, we had to do it properly.

Hence he and his friend set up Computer LogicX. Recalling this experience, John recognises

It has made me so much more responsible and aware of how companies work. It gives me a warm feeling when I receive a letter addressed to Computer LogicX. I have achieved something!

This need to achieve drives us all as lifewide learners and success does not always come easily. John struggled to get to grips with the programming manual that would help him to develop his app. He gave up but returned to it and finally triumphed. He learnt not only how to set up a company and develop the software: he had to balance his time with his studies and social life; he learnt how to work as part of a team, in short, he feels

I have become more aware, confident and knowledgeable in many more areas than any degree can provide (...) Lifewide learning is about addressing different forms of learning that cannot be taught through standard education, but through natural development (...) The concept of lifewide learning helps me to individualise myself, and stand out from all the others.



## Winning does not encourage learning

Stefan's story demonstrates how he has 'learned to distinguish between realities and visions of realities,' so being able 'to make better choices now.'

After a first degree in Business Studies, with the aim of improving his skills in project management and team work, he enrolled on a Master's degree in Entrepreneurship. He was driven by financial gain, and had a vision of himself

Wearing a suit and tie to work, sitting in wood-finished conference rooms and using my company cell phone (naturally hands-free) whilst driving my company car.

He sought out opportunities to work with others. One such was a group essay competition, which his team won – to his later regret. He explains this paradox:

Winners seldom think about what it was that made them successful, don't do debriefings, and tend to enjoy the glorious triumph rather than make an effort to analyse for the future.

The lesson was learnt when, three years later, he put together another team and was convinced that it would win the competition. It did not. In response to his disappointment Stefan

Came back home and tried to think about what went wrong. And it only then occurred to me that all the effort and attention we put into our entry was about form rather than mere substance.



The experience led to a 'genuinely life-changing realisation' that 'my vision of myself was not true.' Now, his diverse activities are

... of a completely different nature. I teach Polish, I participate in challenges, I attend a fitness programme at the Sports Centre and I'm on my way to set up a business. Instead of developing knowledge, I focused on developing character traits and skills.

Well on his way to lifewide learning, Stefan concludes:

(...) we have to draw conclusions from every phenomenon we can observe or experience, rather than take comfort in limiting ourselves to formal knowledge.

### **I started to realise that maybe I could do this**

Self-image also underpins Michele's story. She begins by explaining

I have chronic SAD, or Social Anxiety Disorder, and that means just finding the courage to leave my room in the morning can be a challenge.

As a result of this condition, Michele had achieved mixed results at school and twice dropped out of university before being accepted at a third one. In order to support herself through her new studies, she looked for a job that would be full time until her course began, and part-time during term. She found a position, working for a charitable housing association that was 'a mess' due to an impending reshuffle. Michele drew confidence from her familiarity with the scheme and the apparent simplicity of the job. She was encouraged by her salary, not for monetary reasons, but because of what it symbolised for her:

The money was far, far more than I had earned previously, and this was a way to challenge my self-perceptions as someone who would never be able to hold down a "normal" job.

In fact, Michele was so successful in the company that she was kept on beyond her contract. She was responsible for the entire scheme, and now, property completions were taking place. Still revealing her lack of self-belief, she admits,

I felt ridiculously proud of myself, though even as I type this I want to make excuses and say it wasn't all me, maybe they attributed more to me than I actually did.



But she could not deny the fact that she had been liaising successfully with solicitors and surveyors and 'I started to realise that maybe I could do this: it was possible to be normal.'

Michele was understandably anxious about how she would cope balancing her studies and employment. A year on, she is proud of her success in both and concludes with her own take on lifewide learning: it is

About getting out there and doing the ordinary things. When I go to work and use spreadsheets and case files and go down to meet people in reception, I'm learning. These small, ordinary experiences are fulfilling when they don't come easily (...)  
Standing on the top of a mountain couldn't make me as happy as holding down my job.

### **A chance to truly learn who I am**

The stories have so far shown how the narrator made sense of experiences through reflecting retrospectively. In this final narrative, we see how Katya used a lifewide learning award framework to structure her present and future personal development.

The promise of an award seems to have given her permission to explore extra-curricular interests, things which she had felt she should not be doing as they did not relate directly to her formal studies. She says of the award scheme,

It meant a chance to truly learn who I am, through spending time doing those things I did not seem to have time for since starting University. I dedicated my award to the things I feel passionate about, and tried to learn as much as possible from those things.

Katya's first action was to draw on her love of children and work as an educational volunteer supporting children with learning difficulties. This was a personal challenge as she recognised that she lacked confidence but she came to see that working with these children taught her as much as she taught them. The experience

Showed me that a journey towards learning cannot always be done on my own. I do not believe I would have benefitted as much from teaching children who were not prepared to take the journey with me, children who would agree to get to know me and be patient with me those weeks when I was not sure about what I was doing (...) I saw it as me teaching them, however they ended up teaching me as well. And last but not least, I saw my own development through the teaching, but I never imagined we would develop together.

Inspired by this success, Katya went on to volunteer with Girlguiding UK, and again realised that beyond the skills and knowledge involved, 'I still believe learning who I was, through and with the children, was equally important.'

In a third volunteer role, helping young people with learning disabilities to live independent lives, Katya was forced to confront her difficulty in adapting to their needs. She persevered, succeeded and felt motivated by her success:

I have learnt through doing, and I did find it quite scary sometimes. Looking back I can see how I turned from clueless to very confident in my volunteer position.

These themes of increased self-confidence, collaborative learning and self-discovery have been reflected in the other stories in this collection. Katya's concluding words provide a genuine insight into the value that a lifewide award framework can provide for helping participants develop the critical reflection associated with lifewide and lifelong learning. She now writes,

Participating in this award has taught me how the learning I am doing today goes together with the learning I did yesterday, and how new knowledge comes from previous knowledge. I have seen how the things I engage with help me to develop, and I am growing and learning much more than before now that I can see the value of it. I have learnt to recognise an opportunity and take the chance. These insights make me feel certain that I will continue working on my personal development even after I have completed the award.



## End note

### *Critical reflection*

These 8 narratives have illustrated the highest levels of critical reflection, where description gives way to analysis of feelings and thoughts, leading to greater understanding of how to deal with future situations. The story-tellers may not have started out with this level of complex thinking, but, as their accounts progress, they have shown how each new experience has informed their action and ability to cope with unfamiliar circumstances.

In our introduction, we proposed 7 indicators of personal development. How well are they reflected in these stories?

### *Knowledge to deal with situations*

All narrators have acquired knowledge for dealing with future experiences, be this in the workplace, as in the case of Sally and Rashmini, in personal interactions, as for Jamila, or in voluntary roles, such as those described by Katya. How they have achieved this draws on the other indicators.

### *Creativity and resourcefulness*

For most of the narrators, their ability to deal with new experiences relates to a sense of greater self-confidence, often derived from having pushed themselves out of their comfort zones. We saw how Stefan realised that his assumed values were not his real ones, leading him to a complete career change. Michele surprised herself at her ability to hold down a job and be 'normal'. Her resourcefulness brought rewards both for her personal development and for the housing association.

### ***Appropriate and effective communication***

Good communication is revealed as an essential tool for dealing successfully with experiences. Sally's account shows us that communication can be tacit, as when she found her father's favourite music playing by his hospital bedside, or when the touch of a carer reassured her that she mattered to them. Rashmi learnt that she needed to express her emotions verbally, and that purposely knocking into people was not helping her cope with her anger.

### ***Cultural awareness***

Jamila's account of her coming from Pakistan to England stands out as model of how not to criticise different cultures, but rather to see the value of each in its own context. Rashmini's cultural conflicts were both racial and sexual, and her account of workplace bullying is quite harrowing. For Katya, cultural awareness required an understanding of the support needs of the disabled learners she was helping to become independent.

### ***Behaving with empathy and compassion***

When Robert set out as a volunteer, his motivation was to be with the girl he had fallen in love with. He soon found that his interactions with people who had personal experience of cancer evoked in him profound compassion and empathy. Sally was surprised that, as a nurse practitioner, she learnt so much about caring for others and being cared for by others, when her parents were dying. As a result, she felt she had become a better practitioner and more aware person.

### ***Working with and leading others***

Although in very different contexts, each of the narratives shows how the story-teller learnt to work with others or take a leadership role. John had established a joint business venture with a friend whilst still at school. Like Katya, he had to learn how to interact appropriately with other people, and both experienced discomfort before the thrill of succeeding.

### ***Behaving ethically and with social responsibility***

A number of the stories include examples of voluntary work, but significantly, the volunteers find they have gained more personally than they feel they have given to others. Typical of these writers are Katya and Robert. Jamila shows how she learns not to make prejudiced

judgements or respond to racial comments, whereas John discovers that material possessions and image are not the source of his true happiness.

How does this summary correspond with your own reading of the stories? The richness of these narratives is so great that you may have focused on different elements – there is no right or wrong interpretation of individual experience. We hope that you have enjoyed these stories and will be encouraged to embark on your own reflective journey.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks must be recorded for the generous contribution made to this booklet by Norman Jackson. His critical feedback and suggestions have been invaluable.

A big thank you, too, to Chalk Mountain for commissioning the illustrations for this work.

---

<sup>i</sup> See Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford. Further Education Unit.

<sup>ii</sup> Stories submitted for various competitions between 2010 and 2011 organised by the Surrey Centre of Excellence in Professional Training and Education (SCEPTre), University of Surrey.

<sup>iii</sup> RAG societies are university student organisations that raise funds for charity.