Your Foundation in Health and Social Care
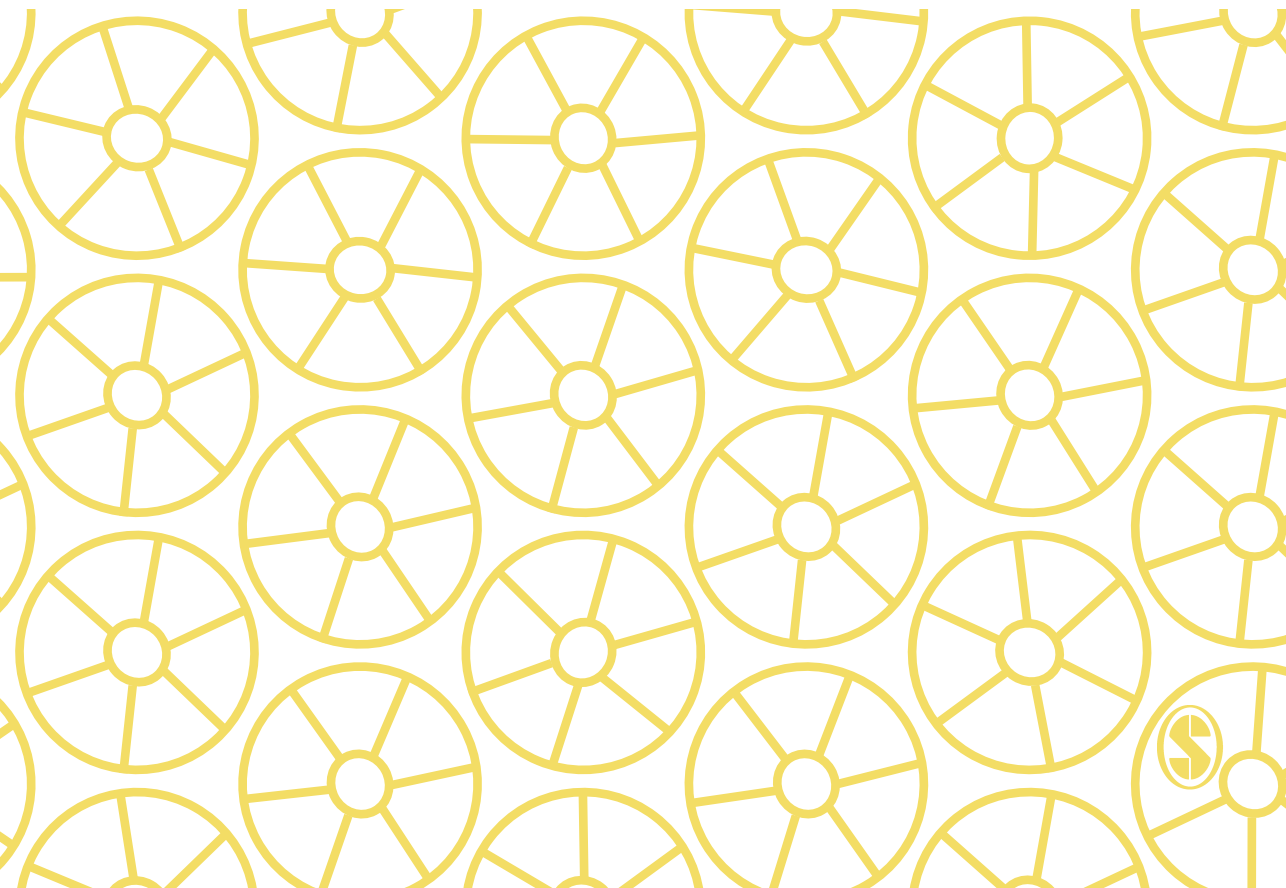
Second Edition

Edited by Graham Brotherton and Steven Parker

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About the Editors and Contributors

Ruth Beretta is a Staff Tutor with the Open University in the South West of England, with responsibility for modules in Nursing and Health and Social Care programmes. She is a registered nurse with experience in teaching and examining in pre-registration nursing, across foundation degrees, and undergraduate and postgraduate education. Her areas of interest are the experience of students in higher education and the development of transferable skills through education and public policy.

Graham Brotherton is Head of Working with Children Young People and Families at Newman University in Birmingham. Prior to working in further and higher education he spent a number of years in a variety of roles in the Social Care sector. His main research interests are in family policy and social inclusion.

Helen Davies is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Professional Studies at Newman University, Birmingham. Her research interests lie in Early Years Education and student experience in higher education.

Judith Mann has worked as a Lecturer and Programme Manager at Cornwall College Cambourne where she taught on the Foundation Degree in Health and Community Studies and The Social Work Degree. Her first career was in social work with a particular interest in mental health and children and family work.

Dr Gill McGillivray is Programme Leader for Early Childhood Education and Care at Newman University in Birmingham. She has a BSc (Hons) in Human Psychology, an MA in Early Childhood Studies from the University of Sheffield and the focus of her PhD research was professional identity construction in the early years workforce in England. She led on an EU funded international project 'Play and Learning in the Early Years for Inclusion' (PLEYIn) from 2009–2011 with partners in Romania and Poland. Gill has been involved in the delivery and management of Foundation Degrees at Newman University since 2004.

Prof Robert Mears is Dean of School: Science, Society and Management in the School of Society, Enterprise and Environment at Bath Spa University. He has published

extensively and his main interests are in the sociology of health and illness and health policy.

Steven Parker works for the Open University as a course tutor in the Faculties of Health and Social Care, and Social Sciences. He has worked as a Lecturer and Curriculum Area Manager working on a range of Foundation Degrees and progression to honours programmes in Health and Social Care, Psychology and Early Childhood Studies. His professional practice background is in social work.

Nadine Pearce has worked as a Lecturer and Programme Manager for the Foundation Degree in health and Community Studies. She has also taught psychology on a range of other Foundation Degrees including Complementary Health Therapies, Healthcare Practice and the CFP for Pre-Registration Nursing. Her professional background is in nursing and nurse education.

Introduction

Welcome to the second edition of *Your Foundation in Health and Social Care*. This book was written to support students taking Foundation Degrees and in revising it we have tried to take account of the comments of students and tutors in response to the first edition. It is hoped that the book will also be useful to students on related higher education courses. It could also support NVQs at Levels 3 and 4. The book is designed to support you in at least three ways:

1 By providing you with advice on different aspects of your programme, e.g. academic study skills or making the most of placement/work-related learning.
2 By providing you with chapters dealing with key areas of study you are likely to encounter on your course.
3 By identifying useful sources of additional information to support you in your studies.

In order to do this the book is divided into two sections together with a final chapter that pulls together the themes of the book. The first section consists of Chapters 1–3 and looks at approaches to studying. Chapter 1 focuses on study skills and how to approach the academic part of your course. Chapter 2 looks at getting the most out of placements and work-related learning and Chapter 3 looks at identifying research and information to support your course and at how to evaluate the usefulness of different sources of information.

In the second section (Chapters 4–9) there is an overview of a range of areas relevant to studying health and social care. Chapter 4 considers the social context, Chapter 5 the issue of personal and professional identity and Chapter 6 the role of values. Chapter 7 deals with the policy and organizational context, Chapter 8 deals with psychology for health and social care, and Chapter 9 interpersonal skills and communication. The final chapter seeks to pull together some of the key themes of the book and look at where health and care services might be going.

Health and social care has undergone a dramatic period of change over the past 25 years and this shows no signs of abating. To give just two examples: in the period since the first edition we have seen the emergence and part disappearance of Every Child Matters and we are about to see yet another reorganization of the NHS. Whether you work in the health sector or adult or children's social care, both the structure of services and ideas about what constitute good practice have changed considerably and it is clear that this process is going to continue. Words like empowerment or advocacy and concepts like consumerism and the mixed economy of care (all of which are explored in this book) are forcing us to look carefully at almost

everything we do. You are therefore either entering or developing your career at an interesting and challenging time. The challenges of working in a vital area of work at a time when the population is both ageing and becoming more diverse will create a new range of both opportunities and problems, and will require us all to rethink many areas of policy and practice in ways that will affect the whole workforce – issues such as how we decide who gets access to services, under what circumstances, how much 'say' they have about the services provided for them, and who provides the services in the first place. All are central and at times controversial issues and are discussed throughout the book. They are questions on which there are differing perspectives and about which you need to think carefully from your personal perspective. We hope the book will help you in thinking about these issues as your course progresses.

How to use this book

This book is intended to give you an overview in relation to each of the areas it covers. As the courses it supports are higher education courses, it cannot and should not be the only source you use, and whilst we aim to give a clear overview for each topic you will need to read/research more fully. To help with this each chapter has suggestions for further reading and Chapter 3 contains detailed advice on where you can look for appropriate material to support your studies.

It is hoped that this book will support you throughout the duration of your course and that you will continually 'dip' in and out of the material. Within each chapter there are a range of activities designed to help you to think about key ideas and issues, and it is hoped that you will pause and reflect on these as the opportunity to reflect is an essential element of learning. Some chapters also include some final questions; again these are to help you to reflect upon and apply the chapter's content.

Using the language of health and social care

In coming to terms with completing a course in higher education it is important to learn the professional language of health and social care. While every effort has been made to avoid jargon, there are inevitably terms with which you will not be familiar. These are explained within the text; however, if terms either within the text or in your wider reading are not familiar to you we have included a glossary at the end of the book and there is an excellent and very comprehensive glossary of health and social care terms available at the www.cpa.org.uk website.

In concluding this brief introduction we would like to take the opportunity to wish you every success with your studies and we hope this book contributes to their successful completion.

Section One

Approaches

1

Approaching Learning

Ruth Beretta

Summary Chapter Contents

- Learning in higher education
- Learning how to learn
- Learning styles
- Managing time effectively
- Effective reading and note-taking
- Writing essays and reports
- Using references and bibliographies
- Plagiarism and how to avoid it

Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify some of the challenges in successful study in higher education and how you can work to overcome these.
- Identify your preferred learning style and adapt learning strategies to help you make good use of your time and develop your learning skills.
- Use effective reading and note-taking skills.
- Make good use of reading lists and assignment guidelines to produce constructive essays and reports.
- Reference academic writing with a recognized referencing system and avoid plagiarism.

Introduction – the importance of developing skills for learning for a Foundation Degree

In this chapter we will be focusing on learning for a Foundation Degree (known as a Higher National Diploma in Scotland). Foundation Degrees integrate academic and work-based learning, so are designed to equip you with skills and knowledge relevant to your employment in health and social care. Although it is a qualification in its own right, a Foundation Degree may link with an opportunity to progress to an Honours Degree. Importantly, it develops your ability to exercise personal responsibility and make decisions (QAA 2010); this last point emphasizes the importance of working in your chosen profession in the area of health and social care, being able to use available evidence to support care decisions (see Chapter 5) and also to demonstrate a critical awareness of alternative solutions to problems or issues; in other words, to develop critical practice (see Chapter 4).

Being a critical learner does not mean criticizing and being negative. It means:

- Being constructively critical and evaluative
- Being open to consider all possibilities
- Being reflective
- Being rational and using a reasoned approach
- Being responsible and accountable for your actions. (adapted from Cottrell 2011)

This chapter aims to address the approaches to learning which can assist in your development to become that critical practitioner.

Learning *how* to learn

When working as well as studying on a course, many of us need to make best use of our time and ensure we develop our skills and knowledge base as effectively as possible. For many people, that means learning *how* to learn. It sounds very straightforward, but often we have memories of previous learning experiences, which may have been negative ones. However, we all have the capacity to develop learning skills and skills of reflection that can improve our time management and make for effective academic and evaluative practice.

It may be useful to spend a few moments reflecting on your own motivation for starting the Foundation Degree and considering:

- Why am I doing this course?
- What knowledge and skills do I already have?
- What knowledge and skills do I hope to gain?
- What has previously helped me to make opportunities for study?
- What may get in my way?
- Am I ready to start taking responsibility for decisions I make?

The answers to these questions will be personal and depend upon your own circumstances. But if you can think ahead to find answers to these questions, you will be better prepared to meet the challenges you may face as your course progresses, both in preparing for your work-based learning experiences and in reflecting on what you have learned. This is why learning how to learn is so important.

In thinking about the challenges ahead, you may well see managing your time effectively as a key area, especially as you are likely to be working as well as studying for your course. You also need to be aware that learning in higher education is likely to include some approaches that may be new to you.

- Use of time:

  - You have much more flexibility in how to use your time. If you decide not to attend lectures, you may not be asked to account for where you have been, so it is up to you how you spend that time.
  - You will be given assignments at the beginning of term which should be produced by a given deadline; you may not be given further prompts about the work, so you need to be organized.
  - There is an expectation that you will use time away from college or university to read extensively around your topic area.

- Approaches towards learning:

  - You can expect a wide range of learning and teaching methods to be used, including the use of educational technologies. These may include virtual learning environments (VLE), wikis and blogs, as well as academic jargon you may not be used to (technologies will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter).
  - Learning in higher education is not just remembering facts; it is about using or applying those facts and evaluating them. Reasoning skills and being able to justify your actions will be important, so that you can link theory to practice.
  - You will be given responsibility for your own learning and it may be up to you to seek tutorial support rather than a lecturer asking to see you at regular intervals throughout the course.
  - You will be expected to read your course handbook and be aware of issues such as regulations regarding handing in work, referencing styles and procedures governing your course.

Learning styles

We all learn things in different ways and it is important for you to recognize what works best for you.

How do you learn best?

Think back to an experience when you found it very easy or very enjoyable to learn something. It may have been a household project, something at work or even an experience from school. What was it that made it a good learning experience? Was it the teacher? Was it because you were particularly interested in the topic? Was it the way you were taught?

Now think back to a learning experience that was difficult or unpleasant. What happened that was different to the first experience? Do you think the situation could have been managed differently?

What do these experiences tell you about the way you learn best?

You may have identified that you enjoy learning experiences which actually involve physically doing something. It is much easier to learn how to bake a cake by mixing the ingredients together and watching the mixture satisfactorily rise in the oven than just to read a series of recipes! And having a conversation with a hearing-impaired person teaches you much more about communication skills than any textbook!

You may associate a poor learning experience with an impatient teacher who does not like to be interrupted by questions, or with a period of inactivity. For some topics such as human biology, there is no substitute for learning about body organs and systems to understand how the body works by studying anatomy texts. But it becomes much more interesting when that knowledge is used to inform us about how medications work in the body, or how disease processes attack the body.

On the other hand, you may have associated a good learning experience with a lecture in which you gleaned a great deal by listening to an expert talking about his or her topic area with enthusiasm and then being stimulated to read up on the topic following the lecture. You may have considered a poor experience to be an unstructured session when you were preparing groupwork for a later presentation.

This shows us that there are a number of learning styles and we respond differently to different situations. It has been suggested that we should identify which is our preferred learning style or styles, and aim to use this style as often as possible to maximize our learning. One (of many) ways of looking at this is the VARK model.

VARK categories

These are categories of learning styles which we may use:

Visual (V): This preference means you prefer to use visual information for learning, such as charts, graphs, diagrams.

Aural/Auditory (A): This means you prefer to learn by hearing material such as lectures, group discussions, presentations and tutorials.

Read/write (R): This means you prefer to learn by seeing information displayed as words, so you prefer to read and make notes.

Kinesthetic (K): This means you prefer to learn by movement or by actually doing something, so you would prefer to learn 'on the job' or by role play, or by a mixture of activities in a session.

Access the VARK website at www.vark-learn.com to identify your learning style and find out how to make the best use of it.

ACTIVITY

What is the value of knowing your preferred learning style?

If you are aware of your preferred learning style, it can help you to study more effectively by using techniques to help you understand and process information. Some of the tips below may be useful.

If you are a *visual learner* you prefer visual information and remember things best when you have seen them. So, to help you process information:

- Use pictures, charts and maps when possible.
- Use planners, organizers or goal-setting charts.
- Highlight important points by underlining or using a highlighter pen.
- Use models when they are available.
- Read and recopy notes for revision.

If you are an *auditory learner* you learn best by listening or being involved in discussion. So, to help you process information:

- Talk things through as you learn them, in a tutorial group or with friends.
- Read aloud to yourself when possible.
- You may find it helpful to experiment whether you study best with music in the background or in silence.

If you are a learner who prefers *reading and writing* then higher education should be ideal for you! You should be able to process reading text and writing notes and essays, but you may find it useful to:

- Convert graphs, charts and diagrams to words.

If you are a kinesthetic learner, you learn best by *doing something*. So, to help you process information:

- Take plenty of breaks while studying.
- Move around as you learn and revise.

Remember that these learning styles identify your *preference* for learning only. That does not mean that they are your strengths or that you should only consider a single learning style for use in all situations. It is important to work on developing a range of strategies to cope with the variety of learning situations you will encounter. You may well find your learning style will differ depending on the topic you are learning about, and most of us use all four styles at certain times.

Making good use of your time

Studying for a Foundation Degree means devoting time to study as well as actually working, so you may find that giving yourself enough time to devote to studies is difficult, particularly if you have family or other commitments.

ACTIVITY

There are many texts that suggest it may be helpful to list all the things you do in a day (including evenings) for the period of a week to help you see where your time is spent. You may want to try this using a table like the one shown in Table 1.1 if you are unsure where study time is going to fit into your life. Make sure you are honest!

Table 1.1 Record of activities

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
7.00	Ironing	Sleeping					
8.00	Breakfast	Breakfast					
9.00	Children to school	Study day (College)					
10.00	Shopping						
11.00	Coffee with a friend						
12.00	Lunch						
13.00	Reading time						
14.00							
15.00	Collect children						

Completing the table should show you where there is the possibility of making study time and this can then become part of your weekly routine, though of course most of us lead busy lives and sometimes we have to adapt. You also need to think about where you can study and try to find somewhere where you can work quietly with minimum disturbance.

Use any course information provided by your lecturers to help you plan your time. You will need to work out how to meet deadlines for handing work in, as well as keeping a timetable of when you are attending taught sessions and allocating time for private study.

Tips for planning your time

1 **Make plans:** Use a planner that you feel comfortable with, such as a diary, Filofax, wall planner or electronic diary to identify important commitments, such as lectures, tutorials, seminar presentations, examinations, assignment deadlines. It may be useful to identify different activities in differing colours and, if you are a visual learner, you may want to hang your planner on the wall or stick it on the 'fridge.
2 **Organize your study time:** Organize your planner on a weekly basis depending on your deadlines and schedules. Make a note of when you have lectures and work to attend and decide how you will use unscheduled slots for reading, assignment writing, library visits, etc.
3 **Organize your personal and social time:** Make sure you have a balance between work and leisure time. You cannot work if you are too tired and you cannot expect to have no time to relax, so make sure you have time to sleep, exercise, spend some 'quality time' with the family as well as time to study. Completing a table like the one shown in Table 1.1 shows you how much time you spend at work and how much at leisure.
4 **Set priorities:** You need to decide which are the most important things to work on and which can be left for a while. Clearly, if you are preparing a seminar presentation for next week, it is more important to be working on that than revising for an examination in three weeks' time.

So, to make the best use of your time:

- **Getting started:** Set yourself clear, realistic goals. Split a big task into smaller, more manageable ones. If there are study tasks you do not like, try putting them at the start of a study session. Get them finished and reward yourself by doing things you enjoy doing.
- **Keeping going:** Try to have variety when you study, so aim not to do the same thing hour after hour. Break up long study sessions with a walk to review your progress and then come back to work feeling refreshed.
- **Know when to stop:** When you have achieved the goal you set for yourself, stop and reward yourself. Take some time to do something interesting but not

essential. Do not start a new task if you do not think you have time or energy to complete it.

- **Know what gets in your way:** If there are things that get in your way, such as noise, poor concentration, distractions such as the family or housework, be active in overcoming them by choosing where you study and sticking to your schedule.

Making time for reflection

You may have realized that we have already asked you to take time to reflect on some issues, such as your motivation for starting your Foundation Degree and which is your preferred learning style. Reflecting or giving further consideration to something that has happened in our lives is something most of us do quite naturally and quite frequently. This might be talking over a night out with friends the following day and considering whether the nightclub you chose to visit was the right one for a future trip out, or you might be mulling over whether your holiday destination was good value for money. Soap operas on television expect us to reflect between episodes – giving consideration to the actions by the characters involved and what we can expect to see in the next instalment. Some of the activities shown on reality TV cause reflection even amongst the media, as differing views are raised on what is and what is not acceptable viewing. We do not always refer to this way of thinking and understanding as reflection though.

Practitioners on professional programmes in health and social care use reflection as a means of making sense of the world. We also need to use reflection as a means of integrating subject knowledge with the knowledge we need for practice; it is this that enables us to develop competence in our work. For example, a health worker who has been visiting a client in their home over the past month to dress a leg ulcer will observe the rate of healing and make judgments about what is the appropriate treatment. If the health worker then attends a course on tissue viability and is made aware of a new product or means of dressing ulcers, they would probably explore the available evidence about the product and reflect on whether it is suitable to use with their client. If the rate of healing is speeded up or the ulcer becomes less painful, this has been a helpful therapeutic intervention for the client, brought about by the application of subject knowledge and reflection on practice.

However, anyone who has tried to encourage a confused older person that it is beneficial to drink at least two litres of fluid per day will realize how difficult this can be and that there is considerable skill in ensuring the person remains hydrated and avoids complications of dehydration such as a sore mouth, increasing confusion and constipation. The available evidence would agree that the confused person needs fluids, but will not necessarily provide the answers on how to get the person to drink – much of that knowledge comes with the experience of the practitioner and is based on previous, similar encounters. This is why work-based learning is so important in health and social care. It is for these types of situations that Schön in 1983 considered that

professionals working in areas such as social work and health care tend to describe what they do in terms of providing care or making decisions about care differently to what they actually do, and he suggested this is because working with people and providing care is 'messy' with no hard and fast rules to be followed. He further suggested such practitioners use 'reflection-in-action' which is 'thinking on our feet' and 'reflection-on-action' which is when we mull over the situation we were dealing with afterwards. You may find that you not only learn from those that you work with on placement, but also from reflections about your experiences after your placement, especially if you share these with your colleagues or supervisor.

Take a few moments to read the difference in the reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action thoughts of Manuel, a health care support worker in a rehabilitation unit:

Reflection-in-action:

Oh goodness, she really is angry – she's going to disturb all the other patients – should I get her a cup of tea? Let's get her into the visitor's room before she screams the place down! Oh no! I think she's going to hit me!

Reflection-on-action:

Poor Mrs Green – she came to visit her husband as she has done every afternoon since he had his stroke, only to be met by the physio who told her he is being discharged later today. She was expecting him home next week once his electric bed has been brought downstairs and a commode delivered for him, so heaven only knows how she will manage him for the rest of this week. I did hear that we need to make some beds ready for acute admissions, but it doesn't seem fair on Mr and Mrs Green ....

ACTIVITY

What is the purpose of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action?

This example serves the purpose of demonstrating that the health care team may say they prepare for patients' discharge and ensure relatives who are caring for them at home are well supported – but in practice, patients may have to be discharged in an emergency to make a bed available for what is seen as a more urgent need.

In the example, it shows that reflection-in-action occurs quickly as a whole cascade of thoughts comes into our minds and we try to make sense of what we see and hear and try to make a decision about how to act. The health care support worker's immediate concern was to make sure the rehabilitation unit was not disturbed by the visitor, so the action was to usher her away as quickly as possible.

Reflection-on-action can take place when there is time and space for it to happen. It helps to explain why situations develop in the way they do and it gives us a chance to consider whether the best course of action was followed and if not, what could have been done differently. It also gives us an opportunity to explore how we feel about that event. Clearly Mrs Green was upset and she need more than just a cup of tea but also an explanation of the situation and reassurance that she would be helped to cope with her husband's impending discharge.

Can you think of a situation you have been involved in where you perhaps used reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, even though you may have been unaware of it? Was it useful? Or did it leave you with some uncomfortable thoughts?

Authors such as Pearson and Smith (1985) suggest reflection is particularly relevant to work-based learning (sometimes called experiential learning, or 'learning by doing') as it helps us to make sense of that experience. But knowing what counts as an experience can be difficult, which is why using models of reflection can be useful, and one of the most popular is that of Gibbs (cited in Quinn, 1988), who suggests the experience is a description of what happened.
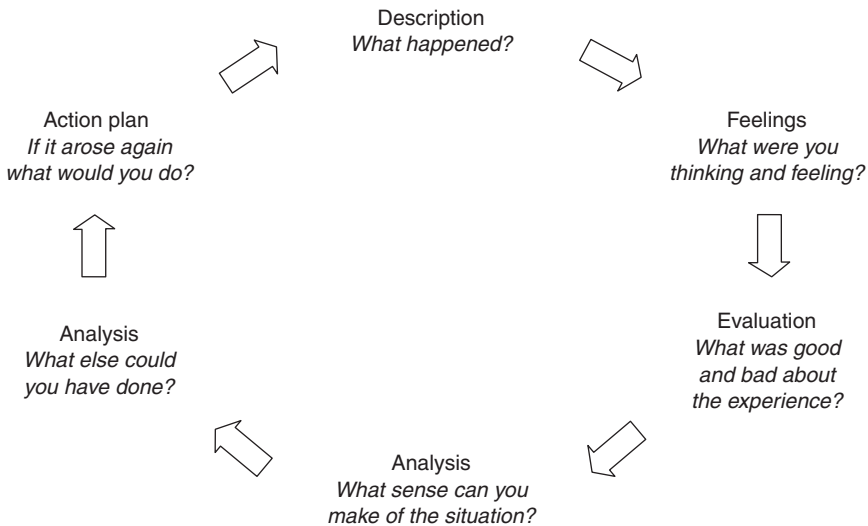

Figure 1.1 Gibbs' model of reflection

- So how would Manuel make use of Gibbs' model in reflecting on that incident with Mrs Green?
- Description: *Apparently, the physio met Mrs Green before she went in to see her husband and told her he was being discharged later that day. Before she had an*

opportunity to say anything, he was bleeped and he went off the ward. Mrs Green was visibly shaking and crying when I saw her – she was very noisy and starting to shout.

- Feelings/thoughts: *I thought this was very odd! Mrs Green is usually such a quiet lady, obviously dedicated to her husband – she has never once missed a day visiting. I wondered what on earth had gone wrong and wondered if she was heading for some sort of breakdown herself. I wanted to move her to somewhere where she would not disturb other people and where we could talk quietly – but I also wondered if she was becoming violent so I didn't try to put my arm round her to comfort her in case she hit me.*

- Evaluation: *I think I did the right thing in trying to get Mrs Green to come into the visitors' room with me – but I should perhaps have made sure someone else knew where we were going in case she collapsed or became aggressive. I didn't like this situation – I always felt I got on well with Mrs Green up until then.*

- Analysis: *It seems the physio had made the decision that Mr Green could be discharged without checking with the discharge liaison team whether his home care package was set up, so Mrs Green was really worried that she would not be able to cope with her husband at home and that she would let him down. I felt really uncertain about how to manage the situation – it all happened so quickly and Mrs Green was behaving so differently to how she usually is. It was my instinct to put an arm around her shoulder, so it was strange not doing this.*

- Conclusion: *I don't think I could have done anything differently – unless if I had known that the physio intended to speak with Mrs Green, I would have made sure they went to the visitor's room and asked if they wanted a qualified staff member with them. I should probably also have thought more about my own personal safety and made sure another staff member was with me – but then again, I didn't want Mrs Green to feel overwhelmed.*

- Action plan: *I will suggest to the charge nurse that all the rehabilitation team should have access to our communications book so they can see the state of readiness of the discharge plans. Although I can see now that Mrs Green did not really pose a threat to me, this is a good reminder that I should take the in-house training on managing difficult situations and de-escalation techniques.*

I hope you can see that the use of a reflective model allows an experience or an event to be described and analysed so that some sense can be made of it. However, even in this situation, there is still an element of uncertainty about the course of action taken, but by rationalizing on the actions, this uncertainty can be managed. This is one of the ways in which a critical practitioner can consider different possible actions and make reasoned judgments about actions. And experiences don't just have to be those that occur in practice – it could be something that occurs as a result of attending a lecture, or reading a journal article that prompts you to consider a new way of working, or a comment made by someone.

Price and Harrington (2010) summarize the value of incorporating reflection into practice as:

- Providing an opportunity to celebrate practice – when we reflect on something that went really well
- Providing an opportunity to correct practice

- Understanding ourselves – why did we act in the way we did? How do we feel about something? Do we need to get some support or further training?
- Understanding others – working in a multidisciplinary team can provide many opportunities for conflict if not dealt with in a confident and professional manner
- Understanding the profession – we do not always understand why, for example, budgetary constraints interfere with the opportunity to provide best quality care or why our instincts may not coincide with professional ethics or codes of conduct
- Providing an opportunity to challenge assumptions – you may have been working in your area of practice for some time before embarking on your Foundation Degree: using reflection should enable you to see a 'bigger picture' of your work setting.

What should you study?

Now you have identified space and time for study, it is important to set about studying the right things. Make the most of materials given out accompanying each module or unit of study, such as course handbooks and module guides. You may also find that your course uses Web-based resources, such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) like Moodle or Blackboard. Some organizations, particularly the Open University, make extensive use of online learning and almost all elements of the module or course can be accessed from the Web.

Module guides and handbooks will contain learning outcomes or objectives, which you can use to identify the depth and breadth of an area you will study. You will notice that these contain descriptive words such as 'describe', 'analyse', 'evaluate', 'list', which should indicate the amount of detail you should give to the topic. (We will cover this area again in looking at essay writing.)

As well as identifying learning outcomes or objectives, the module guide should also provide a list of suggested reading for the module. This will be a list of resources you should aim to be familiar with in order to be able to address the module content and to be prepared for the module assignment. The resources may be a list of books, journals, TV programmes/videos and Web-based materials. Clearly, if a substantial list were provided you could not possibly read all the items, but you should be familiar with the set texts or the recommended texts for the module. You also need to identify which texts you wish to buy to have your own copy, rather than relying on borrowing from the library what are going to be very popular books.

The set or recommended textbook(s)

The set textbook or recommended texts are important and you should make use of them. Don't forget that library staff will know the usual books and journals used by your course, so always make the most of the staff by asking questions and seeking their advice on literature searches. You may find that some set texts are so popular you will only find them in the reference section or short-loan section of the library,

so make the most of electronic versions where possible, especially as these are likely to be the most up-to-date versions.

Where to start finding information for your course

Lecturer notes and reading lists are clearly one of the most important sources of identifying the information you need to find in order to address the course content and be prepared for assignments. You will probably also carry out a Web search using an appropriate search engine (this is discussed more fully in Chapter 3), but you need to take care that Internet sources are relevant and you can trust the academic credibility and author of such articles. You must, though, make use of appropriate books and journals, as Web sources alone are unlikely to give your work sufficient academic 'depth'.

Using educational technology and Web-based resources

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as Moodle and Blackboard are increasingly being used in education. Such VLEs can be used by lecturers and students to download module materials, access reading materials and presentations and many also use forums, which can be described as a public mailbox, where information can be placed and discussions can take place online. This means that you can keep in contact with your lecturer and the rest of your student group, even if you are working remotely. You have the opportunity to keep up with module materials by reading in advance of planned sessions, you can swap ideas with other members of your group on a discussion topic and you can work collaboratively to put together a project or a report.

What do you think are the potential disadvantages of relying heavily on forums to support your learning?
You may have identified:

- the need to work online for considerable periods, which might prove difficult, especially if you struggle to gain access or have a slow broadband connection
- a conflict with time management as you complete other work as well as online commitments
- not many in the group contribute so the discussion is not as rich as it could be
- the group is so enthusiastic about the forum you struggle to keep up with all the postings and are unsure which ones you can safely ignore (hopefully, your lecturer should be managing this aspect of the forum and should be summarizing the postings at regular intervals).

What are the potential advantages?

(Continued)

(Continued)

You may have identified:

- the opportunity for a group discussion or group task which can be contributed to at a time that suits you (forums are identified as *asynchronous*, that is, the conversation is not in real time)
- forums provide evidence that your group is working together, which may be an important learning outcome
- using forums can give a greater depth to discussion about a topic – especially if those posting messages are encouraged to justify their position and reason for making the comment
- it can help you work out a problem through sharing it with colleagues.

Other technologies you may encounter during the course of your Foundation Degree could be:

- **Wiki**: this is a tool for creating and editing documents, as all users can add, delete and edit material. An example that most of us have used is Wikipedia, which is a free online encyclopaedia. You may be asked to contribute to a wiki if your group is preparing a document or report that you all need to contribute to. (One of the reasons Wikipedia is not a respected academic source to use as a reference is that there is no control over who contributes the information, so it cannot be considered to be reliable.)
- **Blog**: a blog is usually a personal webspace that can be used to keep a journal of thoughts and ideas. If it is opened and shared, you can be invited to leave a posting of your thoughts on the topic which can be most valuable in relation to gaining information about people's opinions on a topic.
- **Twitter**: Twitter is a form of social networking where the contributor can write up to 140 characters and reach all those who subscribe to the network.
- **YouTube**: this is a video-sharing webspace which anyone can contribute to. It is a source of a lot of light-hearted entertainment, but the Open University also makes use of YouTube to air some of its materials.

Using texts as supporting evidence for your course

Once you have located a text, you need to evaluate it. Is it worth using your precious library allowance on it?

- Check the introduction and conclusion, which will tell you the purpose and scope of the book and what kind of student it is written for. Is it right for you?
- Is it written at the right academic level? Check for an index, references and bibliography – if any of these is lacking it may not be scholarly enough for your purpose.

- Is the author a known authority on the subject? Is it written from a particular theoretical or ideological perspective? If so, you must be aware of this (check with tutors if you are unsure).
- Was this book recommended by a lecturer? If so, use it – especially if he or she wrote it or edited it.
- What is the date of publication? Is there a more recent edition of the book or is there a journal article with more recent information on the topic? Remember that books contain information that may be two years old before they are even published, but journals may have information that is only six months old.

If you decide to take the book out of the library, you need to make the best use of it you can as quickly as possible. Do not forget that other students on your course may also want to read the book and it can be recalled at any time, reducing the amount of time you can keep it for.

As you read the book, keep the following points in mind, but remember that different strategies work best for different people so try different approaches until you find ones that 'work' for you:

- Set yourself a time limit, per page, per chapter, per book. Keep to the time limit by using your watch and your planner to make sure you do not slip behind your schedule.
- Reading the text for the first time means you should 'skim read' it. This means you need to train your eyes to see more. Usually when we read, we see only two or three words at a time, but with skim reading, you need to start reading from the middle of the page or in a zigzag so that you are taking in more words at once. Once you get used to this, it is easier to get a sense of what each page is about quickly. Key words will become obvious to you so that you can make a note to go back to that passage to read it in more detail later.
- If you find it difficult to skim read, perhaps because you have dyslexia, you may find 'ladder reading' helpful. This is taking the first line of each paragraph to get an understanding of the passage which should then give you a sense of the whole piece.
- Try to avoid going back over a sentence if you are speed reading. Make sure you keep to your time limit.
- Always remember *why* you are reading the book. It is easy to get bogged down in detail and forget the real reason for reading that section. If you come across unfamiliar words, make a note of them and their definitions to help you remember.
- Although it is slower, you may find it helpful to read out loud, particularly if the ideas you are reading about are unfamiliar. Reading out loud helps us to process information more quickly, and as we only tend to remember a tenth of what we read, it is a more active way of absorbing information.
- You may also find it helpful to be asking questions of what you read. What are the main points of this chapter? Is the content believable? Is it of value for my assignment?

Reading skills

Reading is a vitally important activity in working towards your Foundation Degree and it needs to form a part of your daily schedule. Try also to get into the habit of

always having reading material with you so that you can dip into a book or article at any time, whether you are making a train journey, waiting at the dentist for your appointment, or sitting in the car waiting to collect the children from school. Your reading may also be online, so if you can make use of a laptop, iPad or iPhone, even better!

We have already outlined the importance of using reading techniques to get the most out of library sources as quickly as possible. Five more ways you can improve your reading are as follows.

Checking your style of reading

Styles of reading can be changed to suit the situation in which we are reading:

- Scanning, for a specific focus: This is the technique we use when we are looking for a name in the telephone directory. We move our eyes quickly up and down the lists of names until we see one that looks familiar and then focus in until we find the name we want. In the same way, scan reading means we are moving our eyes quickly over the page until we find words or phrases that match what we are looking for. It may be particularly useful to scan the introduction or preface of a book, the first or last paragraphs of chapters, and the concluding chapter of the book, to see if they are going to be useful to you. Scan the abstract section of a journal article, to see if it is worth reading the whole article.
- Skimming, for getting the gist of something: This is the technique we use when going quickly through a newspaper or magazine – we tend to pick out the main points but miss out the details. It is useful to skim read a passage before deciding whether to read it in detail, or to refresh your understanding of a passage after you have read it in detail. We suggested earlier that skimming is important when choosing a book in the library or bookshop and deciding if it is the right one for you.
- Detailed reading, for extracting information accurately: This is when you read every word of the text and work to learn from the text. This technique calls for careful reading, so you may find it helpful to skim read it first, identifying if there are any words you are unsure of and may need to use a dictionary for. You can use sticky notes to mark pages you need to concentrate on rereading. Then go back and read it in detail, making sure you understand all the points that are raised.

Become an active reader

Reading for your course is not the same as reading a novel. You need to be actively involved with the text and making notes to help your concentration and understanding. Some tips to help with active reading are:

- Underlining and highlighting: You can do this with your own books or photocopies, but not on borrowed books! Make sure you make a photocopy first and use

a highlighter pen or underline parts of the text you consider to be the most important. If you are a visual learner, you may find it helpful to use different colours for different aspects of your work – but take care you do not end up highlighting whole paragraphs as this is a waste of effort. It is useful to read the text first without a pen in hand to avoid this temptation!

- Note key words: To do this you need to record main headings as you read and then add one or two key words for each section of the text. You could do this by writing in the margin of the text or keeping a notebook with you as you read.
- Questioning what you read: You need to have some idea of the questions you want the text to answer before you start reading and note these down. You can then add the answers from the text as you read. This also focuses your reading into key areas.
- Summaries: Pause after you have read a section and make a note of what you have read in your own words. You can then skim through the section again and fill in any gaps left in your notes.

Speed up your active reading

We hope you will have realized how important it is to learn from reading. You can train your mind to be active by using the SQ3R technique, which stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recall and Review.

Survey

Get together the information you need to focus on your work:

- Read the title to help prepare for the subject.
- Read the introduction or summary to see what the author thinks are the key points.
- Notice the bold face headings to see what the structure is.
- Take note of graphs, charts or tables – they are usually helpful.
- Notice the reading aids, italics, bold face, questions and activities in the chapter – they are usually there to help you remember and understand.

Question

Use the headings in the text as questions you think each section should answer. This means your mind will be actively engaged in trying to find answers.

Read

Read the first section looking for answers to your questions. Make up new ones if necessary.

Recall

After each section, check that you can answer your questions, preferably from memory.

Review

Once you have finished the chapter, go back and see if you can answer all the questions. If not, go back and refresh your memory.

Spot signposts for reading

As you get used to a writer's style, you should be able to recognize how the writer sets out work to give you a signpost of what is to follow in the text. A couple of examples are:

- 'Three advantages of …' or 'A number of methods are available …' should lead you to expect several points to follow.
- The first sentence of a paragraph may lead you to a sequence 'One important cause of …' followed by 'Another important factor …' and so on, until 'The final cause of …'.

You can take advantage of this style of writing when skimming and scanning and use each point as a question in SQ3R.

Broaden your use of words and vocabulary

You will always come across new words when you are reading and the context in which they are used may not give you enough information to be able to understand them. If you do not find out what they mean, how to use them and how to say them, then you will only ever be able to use words you are familiar with!

You need to be able to use technical words or jargon associated with your subject area. Write the words down, look up their meanings and find out how to pronounce them. To do this, it is worth investing in a dictionary, preferably not a 'concise' or 'compact' one, but one that will not only show you how to spell a word but also give you:

- Alternative definitions
- Derivations (where the word comes from)
- Pronunciation (can be really useful in preparing for a seminar or presentation)
- Synonyms (words that have similar meanings, such as 'shut' and 'close') and confusables (words that seem to be the same but actually are different such as 'affect' and 'effect', 'advice' and 'advise').