College of Social Sciences

Reflection in professional practice: Perspectives and experiences of a group of corporate trainers in the UAE

Mohammed Nayal

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Abstract

Reflection has been extensively noted in the literature to be an essential practice for professional competency. As a result, training on reflection is included in pre-service and professional development in various professions, including teaching, nursing, medicine, social work, the legal profession, and in the police force. However, within corporate training, there is little to no in-depth research on the notion of reflection, how it is understood, if it is used, and how it is practised.

This study aimed to address this literature gap by investigating how a group of nine UAE based corporate trainers conceptualised and used reflection within their professional practice. In addition, it aimed to recommend potential actions that could be taken to improve the use of reflection by corporate trainers. The study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, and data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the nine research participants, and an additional focus group with three research participants who were previously interviewed. The interviews and focus group were transcribed and analysed thematically. The data was then interpreted through a theoretical framework that drew on two sources: Donald Schön's work on reflective practice, and the writings of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky on higher mental functions.

Results showed that corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualised reflection as a tool for continuous development. By learning from past and present experiences, and by thinking about the future, corporate trainers were able to improve their individual skills and deal with professional challenges. While this finding is consistent with existing academic literature on reflection, several issues emerged that could be problematic for the professional development of corporate trainers. These issues include: the tendency for corporate trainers to view reflection through an individual centric lens; the absence of any evidence of critical reflection; and the lack of any formal training on the benefit and use of reflection.

Results also showed that the process of engaging in reflection, as described by the research participants, aligns with a Vygotskian model where reflection was first triggered by a realisation of a deficiency. The next step was a reconstruction of

reality followed by an inner self-questioning phase. This was followed by a modelling exercise that took into consideration various future actions. The final two steps involved the development of a plan of action, followed by testing that action. A main finding from the analysis of reflection through a Vygotskian lens is the tendency of participants to favour self-dialogue over other mediational means.

Within corporate training, reflection can, and should, be enhanced. The first recommended action is the design and delivery of a series of workshops that raises awareness of the professional benefits of reflection and explains how it can be used more effectively. A second recommendation is to encourage corporate trainers to use additional mediational tools such as reflective writing, reflective duologues with a mentor, and co-training. The final recommendation is an initiative to encourage the establishment of a community of practice. A first step towards achieving this goal is the facilitation of monthly group reflection sessions in which corporate trainers can discuss challenges and best practices.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Maria, and my daughters, Hana and Aya. Thank you for believing in me and for pushing me to keep going. I couldn't have done this without you.

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My sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr Lesley Doyle, whose support and encouragement throughout the ups and downs of this journey was priceless. Thank you, Lesley, for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

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To my organisation's chairman, my current MD, and my previous MD, thank you for providing me with this learning opportunity and for your patience, continued support, and mentorship. It is my privilege to work with you.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Mohammed Nayal

Signature: ______________________

Date: 5th June 2023

Abbreviations

ACE	Adult and Community Education
ACTVET	Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
EdD	Doctorate of Education
HE	Higher Education
HR	Human Resources
KHDA	Knowledge and Human Development Authority
KSA	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
LMS	Learning Management System
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
TNA	Training Needs Assessment/Analysis
TTT	Train the Trainer
UAE	United Arab Emirates
VET	Vocational Education and Training
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Reflection has been extensively noted in the literature to be an essential practice for professional competency (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987). In recognition of its benefits, training on reflection is usually included in pre-service programmes or continuing professional development in various professions, such as teaching (Collin et al., 2013; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Mathew et al., 2017; Zeichner & Liston, 2013), nursing (Asselin & Fain, 2013; Epp, 2008; Teekman, 2000), medicine (Fontaine, 2018; Fragkos, 2016; General Medical Council, 2020), social work (Fook, 2015; Kinsella, 2010a), the legal profession (Leering, 2014), and in the police force (Copley, 2011). For many professions, reflection is an important development tool, as it “appears in virtually every professional training mission statement or policy document as an espoused objective of professional training” (Bright, 1996, p. 163).

While there is a wealth of research on reflection in general, and its application in certain professions in particular, there is no in-depth research on the notion of reflection within corporate training, how it is understood, if it is used, and how it is practised. This is a potential problem, as the results of reflection research in a particular profession are not necessarily generalisable given the unique cultural, social, and organisational factors of various domains (Boud, 2010; Finlay, 2008; Moon, 2006). Therefore, it is critical to study reflection within a specific professional context, as the expectations and demands of the workplace can vary between professions (Atkinson, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015; Dimova & Loughran, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

1.2 Study Aim and Research Questions

Given the lack of academic research in the area of reflection that focuses on corporate trainers, and in light of the importance of reflection to the development of professionals, the aim of my dissertation is to explore how a group of corporate trainers in the UAE understand and use reflection. The main research questions addressed in this dissertation are:

1. How does a group of corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection in their professional practice?
2. How do these corporate trainers engage in reflection?
3. Can they enhance their reflective practice and if so, how?

By conducting this study, I hope to provide a foundation for future larger scale research with a representative sample that can focus on various applications such as the role of reflection and the impact it can have on professional practice, specifically within the context of corporate training. I believe that a more rigorous application of reflection can lead to an improvement in the practice of professional corporate trainers. Reflection enables corporate trainers, even those who have decades of professional experience, to question beliefs that are sometimes taken for granted. This questioning can lead to a change in actions that can eventually lead to further thinking and further reflection (Gray, 2007). This can result in a virtuous circle, whereby questioning a certain belief changes the way one works, which can lead to a different, and often better result.

1.3 Positionality

Academic researchers should be transparent about their positionality (Dean et al., 2018). This positionality can be defined as “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study – the community, the organization or the participant group” (Rowe, 2014, p. 2). This means that I need to be cognisant, as well as transparent, about my personal biases and my relationship to the research participants.

As I have worked in corporate training for nearly ten years, it is likely that my experiences will influence my research. Particularly, the research is likely to be shaped by my pre-existing belief that corporate trainers need pre-service training as well as a formal professional development programme to guide their growth. This belief comes from my own personal experience as a novice corporate trainer who began his career without any formal pre-service or on-boarding training. While being thrown into the deep-end forced me to think and learn on my feet, it was difficult to find ways to continue to grow as a trainer without formal professional development guidance. This demonstrated to me the need for researching methods that could help other corporate trainers in their careers. To deal with this bias, throughout the research, I reflected on, and critically examined, my own work in an effort to assess whether my bias was influencing my approach and my findings.

Another potential bias that I need to be transparent about is my relationship with the research participants. Having worked with each of them for more than nine years, I enjoy an insider status. On the one hand, this provides me with a special insight into their specific context, but on the other hand, it can result in limited perspective (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). To address this potential bias, during the interviews, I used the same set of interview questions for each participant and was careful to avoid asking leading questions. When analysing and interpreting the data, I looked for corroborating findings from multiple research participants.

1.4 Methodology

Since this study aims to critically analyse how corporate trainers conceptualise and understand reflection, I chose to follow an interpretivist paradigm. Studies in the interpretivist paradigm seek to understand phenomena from the perspective of an individual (Creswell et al., 2007). In interpretivism, the major aim is understanding and reconstruction (Lincoln & Egon, 2000), as “the same institution, or the same human action, can have different meanings for different human subjects, as well as for the observing scientist” (Lee, 1991, p. 348).

Data was collected from a series of semi-structured interviews with nine corporate trainers. This was followed by a focus group with three of the research participants who had previously been interviewed. Lambert and Loiselle (2008) state that combining individual interviews and focus groups enhances data richness, which can contribute to knowledge production and synthesis. Similarly, the use of interviews and focus groups can result in a triangulation of methods that can help develop a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena (Carter et al., 2014).

1.5 Theoretical Framework

As discussed previously, the overall aim of this study is to determine how corporate trainers conceptualise and use reflection. Bassot (2016) states that “the reflective process is a complex one" (p. 2). With this complexity in mind, I draw on two sources that allow me to analyse reflection from different angles. The first source I use is Donald Schön's work on reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987) as his model's flexibility allows for its use in a wide range of professional contexts (Finlay, 2008; Hatton & Smith, 1995). In addition, Schön's model has been empirically tested and found effective in enhancing learning outcomes and improving professional practice (Eraut, 1995; Finlay, 2008). Subsequently, "the vast majority of approaches [on reflection]" draw on his research as a theoretical basis (Clarà, 2015, p. 261).

Schön developed the term 'reflective practice' to highlight the key role that practice plays in the development of professional knowledge (Teekman, 2000). Schön also used 'reflective practice' as an umbrella term that incorporated two other terms that are "distinguished by their temporality" (Kinsella, 2010b, p. 7): reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) and reflection-on-action (thinking after an event) (Finlay, 2008). The aim of professionals in both instances is similar: to build new understandings to shape their action and "to connect with their feelings and attend to relevant theory" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3).

However, while Schön's work continues to be widely cited in academic books and articles about reflection (Hébert, 2015; Rodgers, 2002), scholars have criticised some aspects of his work, including a bias towards individualism (Collin & Karsenti, 2011), and a failure to consider reflection from a sociocultural perspective (Shokouhi et al., 2015). These gaps are compounded by what Dimova and Loughran (2009) regard as a bias towards Western-only theoretical constructs of reflection that discounts the views of scholars from other regions.

To address these gaps, the second source I draw on in my theoretical framework is the work of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky. While Vygotsky did not refer specifically to reflection as a term, his work on higher psychological functions includes reflective thinking as a concept (Shepel, 1999). According to Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019), the Vygotskian concept of reflection "develops in the course of dialectical, socially constructed, and culturally mediated actions of meaning-making, through the continuous exploration of experience by the agent of the action" (p. 279). I expand further on my theoretical framework in section 2.5.4.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured into seven chapters. In the opening chapter, I introduce the study and summarise the problem I address, the aims of this dissertation, my positionality, the methodology I use, and the theoretical framework I apply. In the second chapter, I start by providing an overview of corporate training and briefly discuss the current state of the profession in the UAE. Next, I discuss the various academic discourses that focus on corporate training and organise them into different areas. I then make the argument that there is a clear gap in research around the understanding and use of reflective practice by corporate trainers. This is surprising given the abundance of research in other professions around the critical role that reflection plays in the learning and development of practitioners. In the next section (section 2.4), I list my research questions and discuss how they were derived. In section 2.5, I review relevant reflection literature and provide a rationale for the theoretical framework I selected. In the third chapter, I discuss the research methodology I use, starting with a justification for positioning this research within the interpretivist paradigm as well as my positionality. I then outline my research approach and detail the data collection and analysis approach. The fourth and fifth chapters are dedicated to outlining the findings. In the sixth chapter, I synthesise my key findings and critically discuss the results. The seventh, and final, chapter concludes this dissertation by identifying and discussing the contributions to knowledge this study makes while proposing areas of possible future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline how, and why, I derived my research questions as well as the theoretical framework I used to analyse my findings. In section 2.2, I discuss the importance of corporate training in the context of a competitive global economy while arguing that it is distinct from other adult education pathways. Following that, in section 2.3, I examine and organise the recent academic literature on corporate training into five main conversations. In the next section, I argue that there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the use of reflection by corporate trainers for their professional development. I then discuss how I derived my research questions, before turning my attention to the topic of reflection. I begin with a history of reflection research. I then discuss tensions in the reflection literature and discuss how my theoretical framework is constructed to address those tensions. I then briefly examine other relevant topics in the academic literature that are relevant to my findings.

2.2 An Overview of Corporate Training

2.2.1 The Importance of Corporate Training Worldwide

In an increasingly globalised economic landscape, organisations are under constant pressure to enhance productivity, improve performance, elevate quality standards, and provide superior service (Helyer, 2015; Meyer & Marsick, 2003; Peters & Humes, 2003; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2017). The global economy is also placing extra demands on employees as they are expected to constantly acquire additional skills and knowledge to be able to keep up with changes at work (Helyer, 2015; Peters & Humes, 2003). These knowledge and skills include “meta-cognitive skills that are both broad and highly transferable, such as problem-solving and the ability to learn” (Peters & Humes, 2003, p. 2).

Within this context, and in order to achieve greater competitive strength, companies are constantly striving to enhance the quality and productivity of their people through investments in corporate training programmes that provide workers with skills that can help the company achieve its goals (Al Mamun & Hasan, 2017;

Jacobs & Park, 2009; Tai, 2006). As a result, the corporate training market in 2022 reached a value of $363 billion (The Business Research Company, 2023).

Aguinis and Kraiger (2009) contend that corporate training provides clear benefits for employees and organisations. For employees, corporate training can increase their job satisfaction, resulting in higher morale and better engagement (Gauld, 2015). In addition, trained employees can generally earn higher wages and are at less risk of unemployment (Walter, 2001), which can have positive implications for the wider society (Elshafie, 2014). For organisations, training can drive increases in output and productivity (Boud, 1998; Gauld, 2015) and result in lower organisational costs due to reduced rates of employee attrition (Brum, 2007; Memon et al., 2016; Owens Jr, 2006).

2.2.2 Defining Corporate Training

A widely referred to definition of training comes from the UK Manpower Services Commission (Wilson, 2005). In the Glossary of Training Terms, training is defined as "a planned process to modify attitude, knowledge or skill behaviour through learning experience to achieve effective performance in an activity or range of activities" (Manpower Services Commission, 1981, as cited in Wilson, 2005, p. 4). Building on that definition, Aguinis and Kraiger (2009) define corporate training as "the systematic approach to affecting individuals' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to improve individual, team, and organizational effectiveness" (p. 451). Similarly, Rothwell et al. (1999) describe corporate training as "identifying and developing key competencies that enable employees to perform their current jobs" (p. 9). From these definitions, training can be characterised as a planned process that is targeted towards developing a work-related skill that can result in an immediate application (Wilson, 2005).

Corporate training is of high importance to both companies and to employees. For companies, rapid technological change and the reduced cycle for the introduction of new products and services has forced them to adopt new strategies and objectives (Lusterman, 1985). As a result, companies and managers need employees with new skills who can adapt to constant changes (Tymon & Mackay, 2016). Human resource departments, which are typically responsible for corporate training, have a clear mandate: to ensure that employees have the right set of skills and competences to achieve the company's goals. As one manager interviewed by Lusterman (1985) commented, "Our human resources function was given a new charter three years ago – to contribute to the company's competitive edge by recruiting talented people, training them, and not letting them stagnate" (p. 2).

While employees can work at a high level of competency for a while, the rapid pace of technology and the common introduction of new processes and ways of doing things will cause the employee's competence level to eventually drop. These increasingly short cycles between changes in job content, along with the relentless movement of jobs towards knowledge work, "have raised the need for organizations to better understand and manage employee competence" (Jacobs & Park, 2009, p. 135). Within the corporate world, there is general agreement that training can help companies develop a sustainable competitive advantage (Aragón-Sánchez et al., 2003).

2.2.3 The Distinctiveness of Corporate Training Compared to VET

In the modern educational landscape, adult learners have several formal post-compulsory pathways at their disposal (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). These pathways include Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes tailored to specific trades or professions, Higher Education (HE) courses offering advanced academic and professional qualifications, and Adult and Community Education (ACE) programmes that focus on personal development and lifelong learning (Billett, 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Schuller & Watson, 2009).

At first glance, corporate training might appear to be an extension of VET as both pathways aim to bridge the gap between formal education and the practical demands of the workforce, tailoring their curricula to real-world applications and job-specific competences (Billett, 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Additionally, both employ experiential learning methods, leveraging hands-on activities, simulations, and real-life scenarios to reinforce theoretical constructs (Billett, 2011; Salas et al., 2012). This mutual emphasis on practicality and experiential learning means that adult educators, in both VET and corporate training, share similar competences.

The competences required for effective adult educators have been widely documented in several studies (Axmann et al., 2015; Brinia & Kritikos, 2012; Buiskool et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2015; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2014; Gauld, 2015; Gauld & Miller, 2004; Kandiller & Özler, 2015; Karmel et al., 2014; Wahlgren, 2016). For example, according to Gauld (2015), effective trainers should understand adult teaching methods, enjoy teaching, counsel students, encourage trainees to think for themselves, keep current and up-to-date, and use appropriate training methods (see Appendix A for a complete list of competences). It can be argued that these competences are applicable to all adult educators including VET instructors as well as corporate trainers. Wahlgren (2016) underscores this point as he states that “certain competence requirements can be identified which transcend national, cultural and functional boundaries” (p.1).

However, while VET and corporate training share similar elements, the specific context of corporate training makes it distinct from VET as corporate trainers face a unique set of challenges. The first challenge is the necessity to continually customise content. While VET is designed to comprehensively equip learners for specific trades, ensuring their readiness for job roles (Billett, 2011), corporate training must align with a company's unique goals and objectives. The diverse nature of organisational contexts often demands that trainers fine-tune their content to suit individual organisational needs (Salas et al., 2012). An additional challenge is the shorter duration of corporate training programmes. While VET programmes, designed to be exhaustive, often span several months to years (Billett, 2011), corporate training programmes are typically more concise, ranging from half-day workshops to week-long intensive courses (The Business Research Company, 2023). This limited timeframe demands that corporate trainers strike a delicate balance between content depth and course brevity (Meyer & Sloman, 2014). Another unique challenge for corporate trainers is managing potentially disengaged participants. Unlike VET, where enrolment is often by choice, some participants in corporate training might be forced to attend due to managerial mandates (Salas et al., 2012). This externally-imposed participation can sometimes result in disengagement, complicating the process of effective training (Salas et al., 2012;

Meyer & Sloman, 2014). Finally, whereas successful VET participants typically earn a recognised qualification (Billett, 2011), the main goal of corporate training is the dissemination of knowledge and skills, outcomes that are not always easy to measure (Ford et al., 2018). This measurement challenge often places trainers in the position of having to articulate the direct advantages of their courses (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009).

While there are commonalities between corporate training and VET, the challenges intrinsic to corporate training—rooted in its specific context and objectives—firmly establish its distinct identity.

2.2.4 Corporate Training in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was established in 1971 as a federation of seven different "emirates" or states (Central Intelligence Agency, 2021). The UAE quickly grew from a population of 230,000 in 1971, with an economy that depended on pearling and fishing, to a population of 9.7 million in 2020 with a strong infrastructure and one of the highest incomes per capita globally (Khan & Panjwani, 2021; World Bank, 2022). This transformation from a small nation to a thriving economy was achieved through a combination of several factors, including a) prudent management of the wealth generated from the discovery of oil in the 1950s (Young, 2020); b) investment in world-class infrastructure, such as airports, seaports, roads, and public transport systems (Sushil Jha & Tandon, 2019); c) establishment of the UAE as a regional and global business hub through offering a favourable business environment, low taxes, and free trade zones (Ahmed & Al Amiri, 2022); and e) cultural openness and tolerance that has helped attract talented people from all around the globe (Lootah, 2021). This has greatly improved the lifestyle of the local population and attracted a large expatriate community seeking job opportunities in various sectors of the UAE economy (El-Haddad, 2006; Tahir & Egleston, 2019).

In 2010, the UAE government launched UAE Vision 2021, a development plan that outlined four main elements to guide the continued growth of the country (UAE Prime Minister's Office, 2010). These elements are "an ambitious and confident nation grounded in its heritage, a strong union bonded by a common destiny, a competitive economy driven by knowledgeable and innovative Emiratis, and a nurturing and sustainable environment for quality living” (UAE Prime Minister's Office, 2010). Among these four elements, the third point regarding developing a competitive economy is further outlined in the Vision 2021 document as requiring the development of a knowledge-based economy (UAE Prime Minister's Office, 2010) with a focus on lifelong learning for all.

Lifelong learning includes several elements, such as self-directed learning, informal learning, mentoring, and corporate training (Knowles et al., 2020). While corporate training is only one of the elements within lifelong learning, it is a critical element as it provides employees with targeted skill development opportunities (London, 2011). However, while the UAE has made strides in several educational sectors (Ashour, 2020), less attention has been paid to corporate training (Barnett, 2015). In the UAE, emirate-level institutions that promote and regulate training are “embryonic at best” (Barnett, 2015, p. 15). The two main institutions for validating corporate training are the Dubai Knowledge and Human Capital Authority (KHDA) and the Abu Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (ACTVET). In order to establish a corporate training company in Dubai, individuals or companies need to apply for a license from KHDA (KHDA, 2021). The requirements are mainly commercial and are based on paying a fee and obtaining a business space. There are no licensing requirements for corporate trainers, meaning that anyone can be hired to provide corporate training courses. In Abu Dhabi, the ACTVET licensing requirements are similar, with an added requirement that any corporate trainer must have at least two years of experience as a lecturer or trainer (ACTVET, 2021). Overall, there are no requirements for continuing professional development, unlike other professions such as teaching or nursing, which require proof of continuing education for re-licensing purposes within the UAE (El-Haddad, 2006).

2.3 Recent Academic Conversations on Corporate Training

2.3.1 Introduction

In the next sections, I discuss the most prominent academic conversations on corporate training, which I have synthesised into five areas: 1) training transfer and measuring investment return; 2) identifying training needs; 3) instructional design; 4) delivery through technology and digital learning; and 5) the role of corporate trainers.

2.3.2 Training Transfer and Measuring Investment Return

While training transfer is one of the most researched areas in organisational training and development (Ford et al., 2018), scholars continue to struggle with the question of how much learning from different training events is actually transferred to the workplace (Ford et al., 2018; Rampun et al., 2020; Schoeb et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Topics within this conversation area include the influence of contextual factors such as organisational culture, management support, and learning transfer on training outcomes (Ford et al., 2018; Kodwani & Prashar, 2021; Lacerenza et al., 2017; Pismieniuk & Korobova, 2021), strategies to enhance training transfer (Baldwin et al., 2017; Blume et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2016), and accurately measuring the Return on Training Investment (ROTI) (Garavan et al., 2019; Konstantin & Lobova, 2019; Kucherov & Manokhina, 2017; Lapidus & Kazakov, 2017; Phillips & Phillips, 2016). Training transfer seems to be a continuing area of discussion, as Ford et al. (2018) state that “the transfer problem remains acute and there is so much more of value that remains unknown” (p. 220).

2.3.3 Identifying Training Needs

A second area of focus revolves around training needs analysis/assessments (TNAs). Within organisations, TNAs are used to identify the gap between employees’ current knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and the desired level of KSAs (Cotes & Ugarte, 2021; Markaki et al., 2021). Recent academic research has explored various approaches to conducting needs analysis, including needs assessment surveys, focus groups, and job analysis (Cotes & Ugarte, 2021; Ludwikowska, 2018). Studies have also highlighted the importance of involving both employees and managers in the needs analysis process to ensure alignment with organisational goals and individual development needs (Bin Othayman et al., 2022; Cigularov & Dillulio, 2020). Additionally, researchers continue to examine the role of technology, such as machine learning algorithms and virtual reality simulations, in analysing job performance data and identifying areas for improvement in employee training (Garg et al., 2022). A tension within this area is the conflict between the perceived benefits of TNAs and the difficulties in efficiently implementing them. While TNAs can assist organisations in identifying talent gaps and improving employee performance, the process is often resource-intensive (Rodriguez & Walters, 2017) and can face resistance from some employees who are dubious of the impact of training programmes (Bin Othayman et al., 2022).

2.3.4 Instructional Design

A third academic conversation centres on the application of instructional design principles in the development of effective corporate training programmes. Topics within this area include the use of adaptive learning systems to customise learning experiences based on learners' preferences and skills (Gavril et al., 2017; Pashev et al., 2020; Sokol et al., 2021), the shift towards more learner-centred approaches to instructional design (Gupta, 2022; Mikroyannidis et al., 2018; Wu, 2016), the use of microlearning to improve knowledge retention and application of learned skills (Diaz Redondo et al., 2021; Nanjappa et al., 2022; Taylor & Hung, 2022), and the use of gamification to enhance learner engagement (Iacono et al., 2020; Larson, 2020b). On-going debates within this area include the need for instructional designers to strike the right balance between flexibility, adaptability, and the achievement of specific learning objectives (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022; Sugar & Luterbach, 2016), and ethical considerations in personalised learning, since the collection and analysis of learners' data can potentially lead to biased algorithms and discriminatory practices (Olivier, 2020; Regan & Jesse, 2019).

2.3.5 Delivery Through Technology and Digital Learning

Another area of conversation revolves around the use, and effectiveness, of technology and digital tools in training delivery. Topics within this area include the use of e-learning platforms (Malureanu et al., 2021), mobile learning (Butler et al., 2021; Parsons, 2016), learning management systems (LMS) (Dodson et al., 2015; Shurygin et al., 2021), and augmented reality (Martins et al., 2021; Morgado et al., 2016). Tensions in this area include the need for balancing effective learning outcomes with cost-effectiveness (Martins et al., 2021); the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing learning outcomes (Sabale & Gomathi, 2022); bridging the digital divide and ensuring equal access to technology to all employees regardless of gender, geography, and age (Martins et al., 2021; Polushkina, 2021);

privacy and security concerns from the collection and use of employee data in technology-based training (Hopp, 2015; Larson, 2020a); and questions around the effectiveness of technology-based training for developing soft skills (Schislyaeva & Saychenko, 2022).

2.3.6 The Role of Corporate Trainers

Within the literature, there is broad agreement that the effectiveness of the corporate trainer is one of the most critical elements in ensuring the success of the learning experience (Andoh et al., 2022; Arghode & Wang, 2016; Brotherton & Evans, 2010; Das, 2017; Ford et al., 2018; Gauld, 2015; Ghosh et al., 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Giangreco et al., 2009; Rangel et al., 2015). Topics within this area include research on competences required for effective trainers (Axmann et al., 2015; Brinia & Kritikos, 2012; Choi et al., 2015; Gauld, 2015; Kandiller & Özler, 2015; Wahlgren, 2016), challenges faced by corporate trainers (Ahmed & Khaleque, 2017; Karmel et al., 2014; Rothwell et al., 2018), and the design and implementation of professional development programmes (Kwon & Cho, 2020; Meyer & Sloman, 2014; Meyer & Marsick, 2003).

A major issue of concern within this area revolves around the "education, training and development of those responsible for designing and implementing corporate training and learning programmes" (Meyer & Sloman, 2014, p. 98). Corporate trainers are often selected for their expertise in a particular professional field under the assumption that a high level of competence in a certain subject automatically translates to aptitude in training others (Cornelius, 2018; Gauld, 2015). However, "when it is assumed that someone with experience on the job will make a great teacher, the results are often disastrous for the students, the trainer, and the organization" (Gauld, 2015, p. 119). The lack of previous teaching expertise is corroborated by my research results, as the majority of research participants were not provided with adequate pre-service training on how to deliver training sessions. To compensate for this deficiency, they resorted to learning on the job and refining their facilitation skills based on their experiences.

The need for "learning-by-doing" is mentioned by Gauld (2015), who states that learning how to train is "often a product of accumulated experience with the trainer drawing on their experience of learning and what worked best for them" (p. 124). Within the broader academic literature on learning, a substantial body of evidence emphasises the important role that learning from experience plays in promoting professional development (Boud & Miller, 2002; Fleming, 2011; Passarelli & Kolb, 2011) and how reflection can be used to derive greater benefits from that process (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Daudelin, 1996; Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Passarelli & Kolb, 2011; Schön, 1983, 1987). However, while there is an abundance of research on the critical role that reflection can and should play, there is a noticeable lacuna on the question of how and if reflection is used by corporate trainers.

In the next section, I continue to establish the need for my dissertation by expanding on the gap that my dissertation addresses, locating my research within current discourses, and outlining my research questions.

2.4 Research Questions

2.4.1 Introduction

In the previous sections, I discussed the different academic conversations in the corporate training domain and categorised them into five distinct areas: 1) training transfer and measuring investment return; 2) identifying training needs, 3) instructional design; 4) delivery through technology and digital learning; and 5) the role of corporate trainers. While there are gaps and tensions in each area, the role of the corporate trainer particularly stands out. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the pivotal role corporate trainers can play in ensuring successful learning outcomes, academic research in this area is significantly underdeveloped. In the next sections, I continue to substantiate the need for my dissertation by first arguing that no meaningful discussion is taking place around the use of reflection by corporate trainers. I then locate my research within the current discursive contexts. Next, I briefly discuss how academics have studied reflection in other professions. Finally, I list my research questions and outline how they were derived.

2.4.2 Reflection by Corporate Trainers: Major Gap

In the corporate training literature, several studies have emphasised the significance of reflection for professional growth. Meyer and Marsick (2003) argued that corporate trainers need professional development programmes that include instruction on how to “model the skills of reflective practice” (p. 76). Karmel et al. (2014) researched ways to enhance the learning of corporate trainers in Singapore and concluded that they need support in creating professional development plans “that emphasise learning through interaction, experience, and reflection” (p. 2). Gauld (2015) synthesised the literature on the desired competences of an effective corporate trainer (see Appendix A for a complete list) and identified the ability to reflect as being among the most important of these, as “[e]ffective trainers constantly refine their experiences as they accumulate new ones and new information” (p. 124). More recently, Kwon and Cho (2020) studied 226 South Korean professional trainers and highlighted the important role that informal learning, including reflection, plays in the trainers’ professional and career advancement as “changes in the knowledge economy have required professional trainers to expand their capabilities” (p. 310). However, beyond stressing the need for corporate trainers to reflect, there is a noticeable absence of more in-depth studies either globally, or in the UAE, that focus on reflection within the context of corporate training.

This identified gap presents an inconsistency: on one hand, the literature clearly recognises the crucial role of corporate trainers and the need for them to learn from experience through reflection, yet on the other hand, there is no research on whether corporate trainers reflect, how they reflect, and what can be done to enhance their reflective practice. The deficit this represents is made even more striking by the wealth of research on reflection in other professions such as teaching (Collin et al., 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Mathew et al., 2017; Zeichner & Liston, 2013), nursing (Asselin & Fain, 2013; Epp, 2008; Jeppesen et al., 2017; Teekman, 2000), medicine (Fontaine, 2018; Fragkos, 2016), social work (Fook, 2015; Kinsella, 2010a), legal professions (Leering, 2014), and the police force (Copley, 2011).

Unfortunately, the wealth of research on reflection in other professions cannot be applied directly to corporate training, as reflection is a complex and context-dependent process that is influenced by multiple factors including social, cultural, and organisational dynamics (Moon, 1999). Finlay (2008) argues that since reflection is inherently situated in a specific social and cultural context, research on reflection must pay careful attention to the unique environmental features and complex power dynamics within a certain domain (Finlay, 2008). Similarly, Boud (2010) asserts that reflection is context-dependent as it is influenced by a range of personal, social, and cultural factors. Therefore, it is crucial to study reflection within a specific professional context, as the expectations and demands of the workplace can vary between professions (Atkinson, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015; Dimova & Loughran, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Figure 1 below illustrates how I locate my research within the current academic corporate training literature.

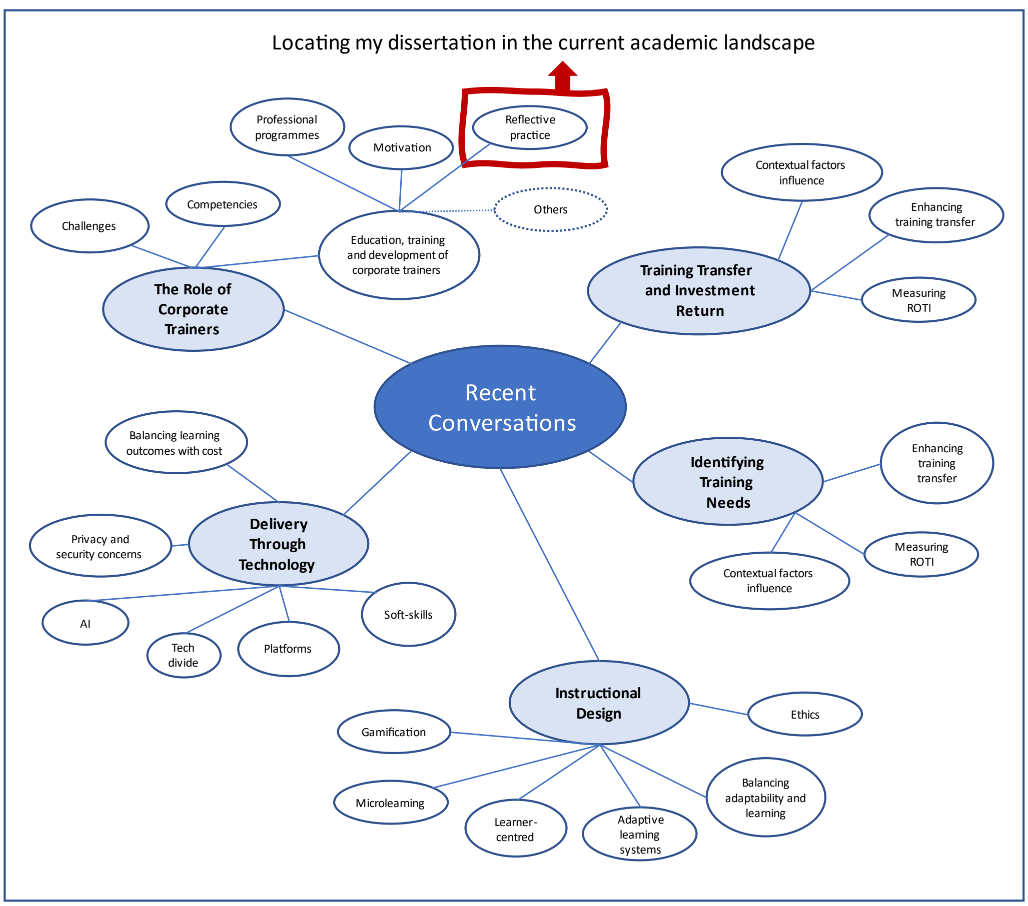


Figure 1. Locating my dissertation within the literature on corporate training.

Having situated my research within the topic of the use of reflection by corporate trainers, my next task was to decide on the research questions my study sought to answer. In the next section, I discuss how I derived my research questions.

2.4.3 Deriving the Research Questions

While there is a plethora of studies on the use of reflection in multiple professions, its use and application by corporate trainers is underexplored. Given that research on the use of reflection in one profession cannot be directly transposed to other domains (Atkinson, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015; Thompson & Pascal, 2012), it was evident to me that a study that examined the use of reflection by corporate trainers was needed. To determine the research questions that should be included in such a study, I first examined the approaches taken by other researchers who, like me, needed to explore reflection in a professional domain with limited prior research. Specifically, I reviewed studies that researched the understanding and use of reflection by physicians, speech pathologists, legal professionals, police constables, and social workers.

Bindels et al. (2018) argued that reflection studies within healthcare focused on describing what reflection should look like rather than how it is actually experienced by physicians. Therefore, they conducted a qualitative study to explore how physicians conceptualise and experience reflection in their professional practice using the following research questions: How do physicians experience and engage in reflection in their professional practice? What are the perceived purposes and benefits of reflection for physicians? What challenges and barriers do physicians face when attempting to engage in reflective practice? They identified three primary purposes of reflection: enhancing self-awareness, fostering personal development, and improving patient care. The study also revealed that physicians face several challenges when attempting to engage in reflective practice, including time constraints, emotional barriers, and difficulties in integrating reflection into their daily routines.

Within speech pathology, Dunne et al. (2021) argued that the perceptions of reflection by speech educators had not been studied. To address this gap, they conducted a qualitative study with speech pathology educators using the following research questions: How do speech pathology educators conceptualise reflection in practicum contexts? How do these conceptualisations of reflection influence the implementation of reflective practice in speech pathology education? In what ways do educators' conceptualisations of reflection impact students' learning experiences in practicum settings? Their findings show that while educators in the study valued reflection, they focused on its short-term practical aspects rather than its meaning and long-term purpose. This resulted in an emphasis on the content of reflections instead of supporting meta-cognitive processes. Dunne et al. (2021) suggested that in their facilitation of student reflection, educators should seek to strike a balance between content and meta-cognitive processes to promote authentic exploration of experiences and lifelong learning skills.

In the legal field, Leering (2014) examined the concept of reflective practice for legal professionals, aiming to develop a deeper understanding of its role and implications within this professional context. Her research sought to answer the following questions: How can reflective practice be conceptualised for legal professionals? What is the role and significance of reflective practice in the legal profession? How can reflective practice contribute to the development of critical thinking, decision-making abilities, and other essential skills for legal professionals? She concluded that reflective practitioners possess self-awareness, engage in critical self-assessment of both theory and practice, and reflect collaboratively with others. In other words, "reflective practice becomes a way of being" (Leering, 2014, p. 105).

Wingrave (2011) argued that within policing, there was a noticeable absence of literature examining reflection. His doctoral thesis addressed that gap in knowledge by answering the following research questions: How do student constables training with the Metropolitan Police conceptualise reflection? What motivates those student constables to reflect? Wingrave (2011) found that, despite reflective learning being included in the curriculum during foundational training, constable students conceptualised reflection in different ways according to their own personal characteristics as well as the quality of the initial pre-service training they received.

Within social work, Watts (2021) studied the beliefs and attitudes about reflective practice in Australian social work. Specifically, her research focused on answering the question: How is reflective practice utilised in learning, teaching, and practicing social work? Her findings identified a strong connection between reflection and the agency of social workers, and that "being able to engage in reflection continues to be the hallmark of *good* social work practice" (Watts, 2021, p. 14).

While there is a common thread between the studies in different professions, namely that the use of reflection is a critical tool for self-development, all professions had a major advantage over corporate training: Reflective learning, as a concept, was already included in the pre-service training or continued development programmes of the research participants. In other words, the research participants in all the studies I examined had already been formally introduced to reflection as a professional development tool. However, within corporate training in general, and in the UAE in particular, pre-service training is limited and continuing formal professional development programmes are non-existent. Therefore, in constructing my research questions, I needed to examine how corporate trainers understood reflection, if they used it, how they used it, and how their use of reflection as a professional development tool could be enhanced.

Taking into account previous research on conceptualising reflection in various professional domains, and assuming that corporate trainers used reflection in some capacity, the research questions that my dissertation aimed to answer were the following:

1. How does a group of corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection in their professional practice?
2. How do these corporate trainers engage in reflection?
3. Can they enhance their reflective practice and if so, how?

Having outlined my research questions, the next section is dedicated to providing relevant details on reflection and outlining the theoretical framework I used to address the above research questions.

2.5 Reflection

2.5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to review relevant reflection literature and develop a basis for my theoretical framework. I begin this section by discussing the history of reflection research, offering a background that contextualises its significance to professional practise. I then outline relevant tensions that are discussed in the literature regarding the study of reflection. I then provide a rationale for the theoretical framework I selected and argue that a combination of Schön's and Vygotsky's approaches to reflection can address the tensions that I outlined. I then briefly examine other academic literature relevant to the findings that emerged from my research.

2.5.2 Background on Reflection Research

The root of the word reflection is from the Latin verb *reflectere* which means "to bend backwards". By the early seventeenth century, reflection of the mind was being used to refer to a "remark made after turning back one's thought on some subject" (Harper, n.d.). In modern conversations, the term reflection is understood to be "serious and careful thought" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) or "a thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In other words, reflection signifies a certain way of thinking where one contemplates and purposefully looks back on a past event or experience.

Reflection is not a new concept. In the fifth century B.C., Socrates used reflection as a way of learning by constantly challenging the statements of his students (Daudelin, 1996). Plato, in the fourth century B.C., espoused that a wise and moral life is one characterised by consistent reflection (Van Seggelen–Damen et al., 2017). Similar to the reflective philosophical approach of the Athenians, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius argued for, and embodied, the benefits of reflective practice (Mac Suibhne, 2009). Other influential historical scholars who espoused the benefits of reflection include John Locke, who believed that the act of knowing is based on the thoughtful reaction to experience

(Daudelin, 1996), and Immanuel Kant, who believed that people should be reflective and make up their own minds about how things are (Merritt, 2018).

More recently, scholarly interest in reflection was sparked by John Dewey (1933), who is generally considered to be the modern "founding father of the concept of reflection" (Van Beveren et al., 2018, p. 2) and one of the "first and most influential educational theorists to explore the process and product of reflective thinking" (Teekman, 2000, p. 1126). Hilda Neatby argues that Dewey had an immense influence on twentieth century thought, stating that he "has been to our age what Aristotle was to the later Middle Ages, not a philosopher, but *the* philosopher" (Neatby, 1953, as cited in Talebi, 2015, p. 3).

Working within the context of education, Dewey (1933) observed that teachers can fall into dangerous repetitive habits unless they think "intelligently" (Farrell, 2012, p. 10). He also noted that learning to think intelligently was not a trivial matter: "While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habits of reflecting" (Dewey, 1933, p. 35). Indeed, Dewey (1933) considered reflection as a tool that frees us from routine activity and enables us "to act in deliberate and intentional fashion, to know what we are about when we act" (p. 17).

Dewey (1933) defined reflection as the "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). While this definition seems to focus only on deliberate thought, Dewey (1933) stressed the need to link thought to action. He believed that people should "acquire the habit of reflecting" (Dewey, 1933, p. 19) and highlighted the connection between intentional reflection and intelligent action by stating that reflection "converts action that is merely appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent action" (Dewey, 1933, p. 17).

After Dewey's work on reflection, research by Donald Schön (1983) brought reflection to the forefront of the understanding of how professionals work (Erlandson & Beach, 2008; Smith, 2001). Several other models and theories of reflection were subsequently developed, including "those produced by Atkins and

Murphy (1993), Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Burns and Bulman (2000), Driscoll and Teh (2000), Johns (2004), and Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001)" (Black & Plowright, 2010, p. 248) as well as cyclical models by Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (2013).

The study of reflection then expanded into a range of professions, albeit at varying rates. While education, and specifically teacher training, remained the area where most reflection research was conducted, interest within other professions increased considerably. In education, reflection has become a powerful movement in pre-service teacher training (Mathew et al., 2017) and a critical part of on-going teacher education (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Jay and Johnson (2002) stated that the value of reflective practice has come to be accepted generally, as it helps teachers to continuously improve and think like a teacher (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Therefore, many teacher training programmes have included reflective thinking education as a key goal within their curriculums (Hatton & Smith, 1995) and various university teacher training programmes have made it a mandatory competency (Collin et al., 2013).

The value of reflection has also been acknowledged in healthcare related professions. Teekman (2000) states that "reflective thinking is the approach *par excellence* for learning and advancing the art and practice of nursing" (p. 1125). Similarly, reflection is becoming more prominent within the development literature for doctors (Fragkos, 2016) and veterinarians (Fontaine, 2018). As a result of this increased prominence, organisations such as the UK Medical Schools Council have developed dedicated guides to reflective practice for medical students (General Medical Council, 2020).

As research on reflection continued to increase, professions outside education and healthcare also began to take notice. For example, a study by Leering (2014) examined the meaning and promise of reflective practice in the context of the legal profession, and Copley (2011) maintained that reflection is a key element of both police training and police practice.

Overall, it seems that for many professions, academic research on reflection has gained traction. However, within the corporate training domain, there is little to no research on the use and application of reflection. This gap is one of the reasons why

I undertook this dissertation, as there is a growing body of literature that stresses the importance of researching reflection within a particular professional context (Atkinson, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015; Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

2.5.3 Choosing a Theoretical Framework: Challenges and Considerations

Reflection research is vast, and given its importance to professional development, several models and frameworks have been developed, including "those produced by Atkins and Murphy (1993), Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Burns and Bulman (2000), Driscoll and Teh (2000), Johns (2004), and Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper (2001)" (Black & Plowright, 2010, p. 248) as well as cyclical models by Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (2013). Navigating this wide diversity of approaches proved challenging when selecting an appropriate theoretical framework for my study, as I initially struggled to justify my choice of a specific model. Initially, I opted for Dewey's work, given his status as one of the "most influential educational theorists to explore the process and product of reflective thinking" (Teekman, 2000, p. 1126). I later transitioned to Kolb's cyclical model (Kolb, 1984) given that his writings are more contemporary than Dewey's contributions. However, as my analysis of reflection research progressed, I identified several tensions that could not be addressed through Dewey or Kolb. These tensions include linking reflection to action in a professional context, failure to bridge the theory/practice divide, exclusion of non-anglosphere notions of reflection, failure to address reflection as a social process, and the lack of conceptual clarity.

Linking Reflection to Action in a Professional Context

A key concern within the literature is the treatment of reflection as an isolated or purely introspective process, without explicit connection of the process of reflection to concrete actions (Fook, 2015). Rose (2016) argues that the benefit of reflection can sometimes be taken for granted, as "the assumption that reflection is essential to learning is taken as self-sufficient and self-explanatory" (p. 782). This can lead to an overemphasis on the theoretical aspects of reflection at the expense of focusing on improved professional practice or meaningful change (Boud, 2001). In addition, reflective processes can be influenced by various contextual factors, such as the nature of the profession, the specific work environment, and the individual's background (Moon, 1999). In response to this concern, some scholars have called for a greater emphasis on the practical application of reflection, often referred to as “reflective practice” (Gibbs, 2013; Moon, 1999).

Schön’s model, which is grounded in the specific professional practice in question, encourages researchers to consider contextual factors when exploring reflection, providing a more nuanced understanding of reflective processes in different settings (Hébert, 2015).

Failure to Bridge the Theory/Practice Divide

The need to balance theory and practice has been debated by several scholars (Larrivee, 2008; Lawrence-Wilkes & Ashmore, 2014). The challenge arises from the need to integrate abstract theoretical understandings of reflection with real-world practical applications in various professional settings. This tension has implications for professional development as well as for the design and implementation of reflective practice interventions. Moon (2006) highlights the importance of finding a balance between theory and practice in reflection literature, arguing that a purely theoretical approach can lead to a disconnect between research and the real-world experiences of practitioners. Boud et al. (2013) emphasise the need for a more practice-oriented approach to reflection, focusing on how individuals engage in reflection within their specific professional contexts. They argue that understanding the nature of reflection in practice can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, as well as inform the development of effective reflective practice interventions. This tension can also be addressed through Schön’s writings, as his reflective practice model emphasises the importance of focusing on the practical aspects of reflection.

Exclusion of Non-Anglosphere Notions of Reflection

Several academics, including Collin et al. (2013), Dimova and Loughran (2009), Ixer (2012), Moore-Russo and Wilsey (2014), and Tan (2020), have cautioned that the current dominant theoretical constructs of reflection are based solely on research by scholars from Anglosphere countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US) (Legrand, 2016). This neglect could overemphasise analytical approaches to problem solving at the expense of emotions and feelings (Houston and Clift, 1990, as cited in Collin et al., 2013). Dimova and Loughran (2009) argue that while current conceptions of reflection are based on the writings of what they describe as Western academics such as Dewey and Schön, scholars from other regions such as Eastern Europe have also researched this topic and provided their own views. For example, Vygotsky, a Russian scholar, wrote about reflection from a psychological perspective that increased knowledge of a person's inner world; while Vasilev, a Bulgarian psychologist, related reflective thinking to higher order mental functions (Dimova & Loughran, 2009). Ixer (2012) suggests that there is a need to take other philosophies and traditions into consideration in order to find acceptable solutions to the question of what reflection is. The value of taking multiple viewpoints into account is also supported by Moore-Russo and Wilsey (2014) who maintain that a proper investigation of reflection should be considered using multiple models.

Failure to Address Reflection as a Social Process

Several authors have argued that the literature on reflection is heavily skewed towards an individualist approach (Collin & Karsenti, 2011; Ottesen, 2007; Shokouhi et al., 2015). This bias towards individualism can be attributed to the wide influence of Schön (1983,1987) on the academic literature on reflection (Collin & Karsenti, 2011). Zeichner and Liston (1996 as cited in Collin & Karsenti, 2011) argue that for Schön, reflection is considered "largely a solitary process involving a teacher and his or her situation, and not as a social process taking place within a learning community" (p. 572). Within education, the danger in considering reflection solely from an individual point of view and without socialisation is producing detached and idiosyncratic educators (Shokouhi et al., 2015). Any professional development programmes that engage reflective practice in isolation can lead to "the loneliness of the long-distance reflector" (Wells, 1994 as cited in Shokouhi et al., 2015, p. 76).

Shokouhi et al. (2015) maintain that one way to address this criticism is to introduce reflective practice from a sociocultural perspective, "where any sort of knowledge is dialogically constructed as a result of interaction among individuals" (Shokouhi et al., 2015, p. 78). Collin and Karsenti (2011) agree with the need for viewing reflection as sociocultural process and suggest using work by Vygotsky to re-conceptualise reflection.

Lack of Conceptual Clarity

According to Noffke and Brennan (2005), reflection has become "part of a slogan system" (p. 60) in various professions. This slogan is sometimes used, without proper substantiation, as a catchphrase that promises great strides in professional development (Beauchamp, 2015). Rose (2016) sums this up by wondering why reflection is too often used unreflectively. She writes:

> *[R]eflection is fast becoming one of those modular terms deemed by linguist Uwe Pörksen [1995] to be "plastic words": terms that have become stripped, through overuse, of their precise original meanings; that are used indiscriminately, like Lego blocks, in conjunction with other plastic words; and that therefore actually function to inhibit deep thought. Superficial discourse about reflection has become a formulaic, mind-numbing substitute for engaging in the real thing. (Rose, 2013, as cited in Rose, 2016, p. 780)*

Collin et al. (2013) claim that in some reflection research, the conceptual framework is insufficiently described "with no specific position by the authors" (p. 114). Rose (2016) surveyed 46 articles and found that 34 of them portrayed reflection as a complex and high-level process. However, in these studies, there was no agreement regarding the process of reflection. She concluded that "given a lack of clarity about what a process is, definitions of reflection as a process are ultimately tautological and in no way help" (Rose, 2016, p. 784). In addition, Thompson and Pascal (2012, p. 311) criticised the dominant understandings of reflection as "lacking theoretical sophistication in some respects" as they fail to consider the social and political aspects of professional practice.

Collin et al. (2013) also criticise theoretical frameworks that build a hierarchy of reflection that requires a distinction between good and bad reflective practices. As an example, Collin et al. (2013) provide the example of the levels of reflection devised by Van Manen (1997). The authors argue that such a hierarchy risks standardising reflective practice values without taking context into account, and "elevat[ing] certain domains of reflection above others" (Collin et al., 2013, p. 110). Zeichner (1994) warns:

> *The idea of level of reflection implies that technical reflection at the level of action must somehow be transcended so that teachers can enter the nirvana of critical reflection. This position devalues*

technical skill and the everyday world of teachers which is of necessity dominated by reflection at the level of action. (Zeichner, 1994, as cited in Collin et al., 2013, p. 110)

Addressing Identified Tensions

The tensions I outlined above can be addressed through a combination of the works of Schön and Vygotsky. Figure 2 below pairs each tension with the corresponding theoretical framework proposed to address it. In the next section, I expand on my theoretical framework by discussing how combining the views of Schön and Vygotsky can provide a more holistic view of reflection and address the tensions discussed above.

Identified Tension	Proposed Theoretical Framework
Linking Reflection to Action in a Professional Context	Schön
Failure to Bridge the Theory/Practice Divide	Schön
Exclusion of Non-Anglosphere Notions of Reflection	Vygotsky
Failure to Address Reflection as a Social Process	Vygotsky
Lack of Conceptual Clarity	Vygotsky

Figure 2. Identified tensions and theoretical framework.

2.5.4 Theoretical Framework

As discussed previously, there are several tensions in the literature on reflection that need to be taken into account when deciding on a theoretical framework. These issues can be addressed by considering the work of Schön and Vygotsky. In the next sections, I start with a discussion of the writings of Schön and outline how he addresses some, but not all of the tensions. I then discuss how writings by Vygotsky can help address the remaining tensions.

Donald Schön's Reflective Practitioner

As noted in the literature review, scholarly interest in reflection was instigated by John Dewey, who is generally considered to be the modern "founding father of the concept of reflection" (Van Beveren et al., 2018, p. 2) and one of the "first and most influential educational theorists to explore the process and product of reflective thinking" (Teekman, 2000, p. 1126). However, after Dewey's ground-breaking work on reflection, an academic moratorium on the topic prevailed for a few decades (Farrell, 2012). This lull was ended in the 1980s by Donald Schön (1983) whose book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, brought reflection to the forefront of the understanding of how professionals work (Erlandson & Beach, 2008; Smith, 2001). Schön is credited with further advancing the frontier of scholarly work on reflection through his canonical and highly influential writings (Finlay, 2008). Even with the continuing proliferation of research on reflection, Schön's "writings remain a classic and enduring resource for discussions about the essential nature and definitions of reflection" (Asselin et al., 2013, p. 906).

Schön developed the term 'reflective practice' to highlight the key role that practice plays in the development of professional knowledge (Teekman, 2000). He described reflective practice as a critical assessment of one's own behaviour in which thought and action are integrally linked (Kinsella, 2010b). Schön argued that professionals can improve and become more skilful in their work through "a dialogue of thinking and doing" (Schön, 1987, p. 31). For Schön, reflective practitioners were those who are aware of the conversations they were having when trying to make a change.

A core concept in Schön's construct of reflection was his emphatic rejection of technical rationality as the basis of professional knowledge (Erlandson & Beach, 2008; Kinsella, 2010a; McLaughlin, 1999; Smith, 2001). According to the model of technical rationality, "professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (Schön, 1983, p. 21). Schön (1983) was concerned that technical rationality, which he described as the "Positivist epistemology of practice" (p. 30), was entrenched in institutions as the dominant model of professional knowledge. In Schön's opinion, developing competent professionals meant viewing professional education from a different lens (Erlandson & Beach, 2008).

Schön challenged the notion of linearity in knowledge development, which views knowledge as flowing from basic science to applied sciences to the development of technical skills that enable implementation (Nelson, 2012). Rather, "Schön argued that the real world was uncertain, even unique, and successful implementation of new ideas involves value judgments as much as objective decision making" (Nelson, 2012, p. 206). For Schön, professional decisions are not only about solving problems that are neatly structured. In fact, there are many instances in which professionals need to "choose the swampy lowlands [and] deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important decisions" (Schön, 1983, p. 43). In these situations, the professional is confronted with cases that are unique, ambiguous, and complex, and a pre-fabricated process is inapplicable (McLaughlin, 1999). In these "swampy lowlands where situations are confusing messes" (Schön, 1983, p. 42), the model of technical rationality, and its associated assumption of linear progress of knowledge, is seldom effective. Rather, a distinctive professional competence is needed when professionals find themselves in these indeterminate zones (McLaughlin, 1999).

Schön used 'reflective practice' as an umbrella term that incorporated two other terms that are "distinguished by their temporality" (Kinsella, 2010b, p. 7): reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) and reflection-on-action (thinking after an event) (Finlay, 2008). The aim of professionals in both instances is similar: to build new understandings to shape their action and "to connect with their feelings and attend to relevant theory" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3). Schön (1983) comments on this by saying:

> *The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (p. 68)*

Schön referred to reflection-in-action as a process whereby professionals need to think on their feet (Smith, 2001). For Schön, reflection-in-action can be defined as the thought process that occurs as a certain experience unfolds, guiding action with the experience (Schön, 1983). The distinction between reflection-in-action and other kinds of reflection lies in its significance for further actions and decisions (Clarà, 2015). Schön (1987) describes this process by stating:

> *In reflection-in-action, the rethinking of some part of our knowing-in-action leads to on-the-spot experiment and further thinking that*

> *affects what we do – in the situation at hand and perhaps also in others we shall see as similar to it. (p. 29)*

The knowing-in-action that Schön refers to is the tacit knowledge that professionals develop while performing their work (Schön, 1983). Schön argues that tacit knowledge cannot be taught in universities or equivalent theoretical settings, as practice-based professionals often experience "unique situations that demand special professional frame-making in order to create patterns of problems before it is possible to solve them" (Erlandson & Beach, 2008, p. 411). In contrast to novice professionals, those with expertise can intuitively monitor, adjust, and revise their work to solve problems (Finlay, 2008).

While knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action applies to professionals who are thinking on their feet during the unfolding of situation, reflection-on-action refers to reflection that happens after the conclusion of a given event or experience (Rogers, 2001). In other words, reflection-on-action can be defined as the process of thinking about a past experience with the aim of acquiring new knowledge or gaining new insights that can be used for practice change (Schön, 1983). In a sense, reflection-on-action is a cognitive post-mortem in which an individual consciously thinks about past actions and appraises potential areas of improvement (Wilson, 2008). It is the temporal distinction between both types of reflection that is important, as reflection during an event may not be always possible due to time or physical constraints (Wilson, 2008). However, when these constraints are removed, professionals may be better equipped to consciously evaluate and review their past practices, leading to improved future performance (Finlay, 2008). Reflecting-on-action allows professionals to explore what they did, why they did it, and what can be done differently. This allows them to develop questions and different points of view about their work (Smith, 2001).

However, while Schön's work is consistently mentioned and cited in academic books and articles about reflection (Hébert, 2015; Rodgers, 2002), there are other tensions in the literature that cannot be adequately addressed solely through his work. These include a bias towards using Anglosphere-centric views of reflection, the need to address reflection as a social process, and the lack of clarity around conceptual frameworks. These tensions can be addressed through the work of the

Russian psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1987). While he is better known for his research on psychological development in children, his work encompassed a diverse range of subjects, including reflection (Shepel, 1999).

Reflection Through a Vygotskian Lens

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1986–1934) was a Russian psychologist best known for his work on psychological development in children (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). Vygotsky was a prolific writer, publishing six books over a ten-year period on diverse topics including child development, education, language development, and the psychology of art (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). In the field of education, Vygotsky's influence remains significant through the continuing pertinence of his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory (Vygotsky, 1987), scaffolding strategies (Vygotsky, 1987), and further expansion of his ZPD theory into activity theory (Engeström, 2001).

In addition, Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology has greatly influenced the analysis of how society and culture have affected the development of human thought (Dimova & Loughran, 2009; Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018; Shepel, 1999). Vygotsky was inspired by Hegel's and Marx's dialectical vision as he sought to understand the social origins of higher mental functions, such as thinking, speech, and volition (Shepel, 1999). The dialectical view is based on the premise that human consciousness arises and develops through a process whereby contradictions in forms of consciousness drive humans to learn and change (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018).

While Vygotsky did not use the term 'reflection', his work on higher psychological functions includes reflective thinking as a concept (Shepel, 1999). For Vygotsky, "a teacher's reflective thinking has a social origin and is shaped by the cultural and historical context of a sociocultural setting" (Shepel, 1999, p. 74). Vygotsky established a set of three principles to explain how learning and development unfold within concrete historical conditions (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018). Scully-Russ and Boyle (2018) maintain that, taken together, these principles have implications for how workplace reflection is conceptualised.

The first principle is the generic law of cultural development, whereby Vygotsky considers all higher mental functions, including reflection, as internalised social relations (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018). Through on-going social exchange, culturally derived forms of external regulation are transformed by the individual into internal tools for thinking (Witte & Haas, 2005). When first learning, the individual will depend on culturally developed models to guide decisions and actions (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018). Through on-going social interaction, cultural forms of external regulation will be gradually transformed into internal thinking tools (Witte & Haas, 2005).

The second principle revolves around mediation (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018). Tools represent a means whereby humans mediate their activity. Tools thus become an element of culture, and the types of mediation they facilitate are similarly internalised into forms of thought (Shepel, 1999). In this way, such artefacts and tools provide the basis for concepts and cognitive processes that help humans think in a structured manner to overcome problems (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018). Since conceptual tools are cultural constructs, the imprint on a person's way of knowing is aligned with the mindsets and learning methods embedded in the sociocultural institutions that produced those tools (Glassman, 2001).

The third principle is dialectical completion. According to Holzman (2008, as cited in Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018), Vygotsky rejected a dualistic psychological paradigm that separates the individual from society, and instead adhered to a dialectical perspective whereby the two are mutually co-constitutive. Scully-Russ and Boyle (2018) state that:

> *Dialectically, higher mental functions are embedded and reflect the historical, material conditions within a broader system of human activity. The dialectical nature of this system resides in the tension between the conventional ways to take up and utilize culture tools (external), and the need for individuals and groups of individuals to complete the activities that rely on these tools (internal). (p. 40)*

According to Holzman (2008, as cited in Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018), human growth and innovation occur within this act of completion. The act of completion, according to Vygotsky's thinking, is a social activity in which people help each other complete their thinking and actions as “they co-create not recreate productive human activity and the associated conceptual tools” (Scully-Russ & Boyle, 2018, p. 41).

Taking these three principles into account, a Vygotskian perspective views reflection as a higher psychological function (Vygotsky, 1982, as cited in Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019) that “develops in the course of dialectical, socially constructed, and culturally mediated actions of meaning-making, through the continuous exploration of experience by the agent of the action” (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 279). It has characteristics of being:

- Dialectical and socially constructed since “it is first developed in the form of shared cognition among the community of learners and then transformed through the process of internalization into individual consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1982; Wertsch, 1985, 1998, as cited in Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019).
- Culturally mediated: Reflection is mediated by different cultural tools such as metaphors, narrative, text, and role-plays (Lampert-Shepel, 2006). Mastering these tools and knowing their strengths, weaknesses, and limitations can support the development of reflection (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019).
- Meaning-making: Le Cornu (2009) states that for many experiential theorists, reflection is strongly associated with meaning-making and is meta-cognitive as it can be considered as thinking about thinking (Fisher, 1998).

Shepel (1999) developed a model to represent a Vygotskian view of reflective action. In this model, there are two planes of action: a real plane that describes practical actions and the ideal plane that represents higher psychological functions. The reflective action journey begins in the real plane with a person performing a practical action (A1) and realising there is a deficiency or developmental gap. The person then stops to reflect and transitions to the ideal plane (A2). In the ideal plane, there is an analysis of the situation and a choice of mediational means (A3). The process then continues with a modelling exercise that takes into consideration different future actions (A4). The next step (A5) is a transformation of the model into practical action. The final step (A6) is control over the performance of a new action (Shepel, 1999, p. 80). The following figure, adapted from Shepel (1999, p. 80), provides a schematic illustration of the Vygotskian process of reflection.

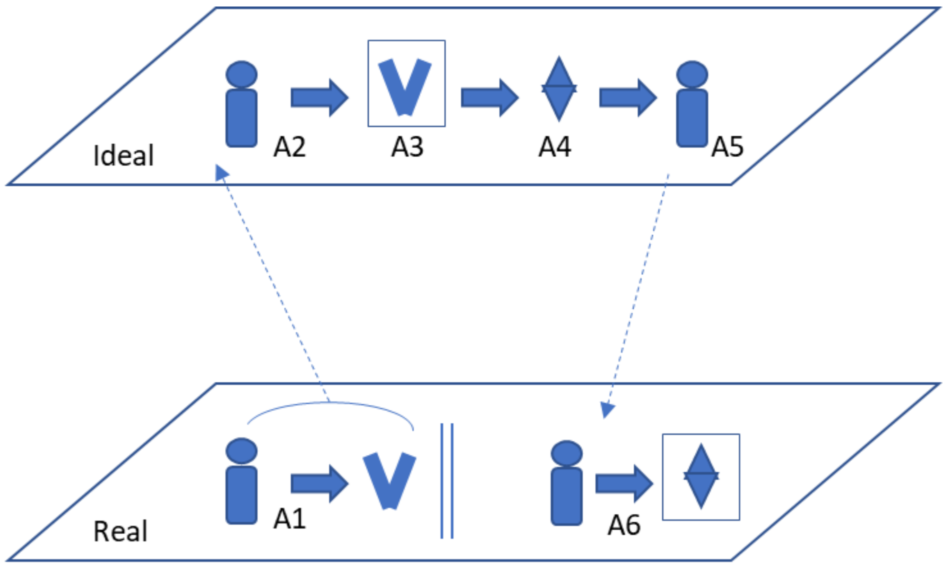


Figure 3. The Vygotskian process of reflection.

Shepel (1999) concludes that according to Vygotsky, reflection in the process of learning a new activity is strongly connected with the higher mental functions of analysis, modelling, and planning. Reflection can have various goals and different mediational means at the different stages of action. Therefore, “[r]eflective thinking is learned: special conditions for social interactions are required to enhance the internalization of various functions of reflective thinking” (Shepel, 1999, p. 83).

2.5.5 Other Relevant Issues to Consider on Reflection

Maxwell (2012) argues that theoretical frameworks, no matter how comprehensive, cannot fully capture the complexities of a study, as research can often uncover unanticipated findings. This was true in my research, as several findings emerged that were not accounted for in my theoretical framework. These findings revolved around tools for encouraging reflection, critical reflection, the learning organisation, and communities of practice.

Tools for Encouraging Reflection

Within the varied repertoire of reflective tools, reflective writing is perhaps the most established component that is central to the notion of learning from experience (Jasper, 2016). Reflective practice literature points to the ability of reflective writing to develop the writer's ability to develop new perspectives on different issues (Jasper, 2016). While reflective writing techniques were not a strong focus of the early work in this area (Platzer et al., 1997, as cited in Jasper, 2016), more detail on the subject emerged as the popularity of reflective practice increased (Boud, 2001; Chirema, 2007; Moon, 2006; O'Connell & Dyment, 2013; Ortlipp, 2008). Boud (2001) states that "writing is a means of puzzling through what is happening in our work and in our lives" (p. 10). As practitioners put down onto paper various thoughts and reflections, they can find themselves constructing deeper meanings and, subsequently, greater learning. Boud (2001) endorses this view by asserting that "learning is inherent in any process of expression, that is, in any way of giving form to the world as experienced" (p. 9).

Reflective journals are another popular tool for encouraging reflection. They comprise the personal and unstructured writing practitioners develop over a period of time, which includes their thoughts on events and concepts (Gray, 2007; O'Connell & Dyment, 2011). While reflective journals have long been used in professional development programmes for teachers, this tool has continued to increase in popularity across different disciplines such as nursing (O'Connell & Dyment, 2011). Journals allow freedom of expression, provide a means for critical reflection to occur (O'Connell & Dyment, 2011), and allow professionals to think about their attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions in order to promote self-evaluation (Gray, 2007).

Reflective journals can be used for two main purposes: daily personal reflection on experiences; and reflection on personal objectives (Gray, 2007). In order to promote a safe environment for learning, reflective journals are usually kept confidential (Gray, 2007). Boud (2001) argues that "the considered reflection that takes place away from the press of immediate action" (p. 9) is critical. This is where the value of journal writing is evident, as it provides the writer with the chance to make meaning from experiences after the fact and potentially learn from these experiences (Boud, 2001).

The value of journal writing also endorses the conceptual understanding of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which is based on the idea that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2014, p. 38). Journaling can help the reflector access memories from a certain experience and elaborate on the meanings of that memory, while also creating a physical record which can be later returned to. Therefore, there is value in continuous journal writing as "journals allow us to practice imaginary scenarios, to ask what if" (Boud, 2001, p. 9).

Similar to journaling, critical incident analysis is a tool that can be used to analyse critical events that can benefit from reflection. Brookfield (1995) describes critical incidents as "vivid happenings that for some reason people remember as being significant" (Loc. 1598). While some of these events might appear to be routine, on closer analysis, these events can be "indicative of significant underlying trends, motives or structures" (Gray, 2007, p. 509). Some critical incidents could be the result of a mistake and therefore, reflecting on it can cause personal discomfort (Gray, 2007). However, while reflecting on critical incidents can challenge a person's sense of self and professional identity, critical incidents are an "essential catalysts for developmental progress, and hence valuable potential focal points for personal learning" (Gray, 2007, p. 509).

Other important tools, albeit less frequently used ones, include repertory grids and concept maps (Gray, 2007). Repertory grids are used to explore an individual's personal thinking about sets of ideas, people, or events; and can help describe how we are motivated, how we learn, and how we communicate (Gray, 2007). The repertory grid can be used for making tacit expert knowledge explicit as it can reveal how participants perceive the world around them (Stumpf & McDonnell, 2003). Concept mapping can also encourage reflection as it is used as a tool to gain insight into the participant's values, assumptions, and biases (Gray, 2007). Concept maps are graphical tools that are used to organise and represent knowledge through a series of hierarchical concepts that are developed by the participant and linked together with arrows that are labelled with a descriptive sentence (Novak & Cañas, 2006).

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is another topic of research that represents a growing area of focus within the literature (Fook, 2015). Several models layer reflection into different typologies that range from practical to critical (Van Beveren et al., 2018). While these layers are not necessarily hierarchical, models that include critical reflection as a layer refer to it as an essential, and even necessary, form of reflection to pursue (Van Beveren et al., 2018). While there is considerable confusion and interchangeability in the use of the terms reflection, reflective practice, and critical reflection, critical conceptions of reflection are aimed at applying perspectives of critical social theory and critical pedagogy, whereas ‘reflection’ is more general (Fook, 2015).

Critical reflection, as an idea, originated mainly in the field of education with the writings of Jack Mezirow and Stephen Brookfield, who built on the works of Paulo Freire and Jurgen Habermas (Fook, 2015; Van Beveren et al., 2018). While their theoretical constructs of critical reflection differ slightly, both writers stress the transformative nature of the term, as it can lead to a “fundamental change in perspective” (Cranton, 1996, as cited in Fook, 2015, p. 441). Mezirow (1990) writes that while reflection implies a critical stance, the term critical reflection is “reserved to refer to challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning” (p. 4).

Brookfield (1998) defined critical reflection as “a process of inquiry involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work” (p. 197). In his writings, Brookfield argued that becoming aware of our own assumptions is a confusing process that is often contradictory (Brookfield, 1995, 1998) and warned that “[v]ery few of us can get very far doing this on our own” (Brookfield, 1998, p. 197).

Brookfield centred his pedagogical approach on a set of tools that he created. Given the difficulty in challenging our own assumptions, he argued that we must constantly revisit our assumptions by viewing our practice through four lenses: the lens of our own autobiographies, the lens of learners, the lens of our colleagues, and the lens of academic literature (Brookfield, 1995, 1998). Viewing our practice through these different lenses "alerts us to distorted or incomplete aspects of our assumptions that need further investigation" (Brookfield, 1998, p. 197). In addition, Brookfield encourages us to be aware of how power operates (Fook, 2015). This awareness can be extended to include assumptions about how the social structure functions, which can provide a platform for transformative action (Fook, 2015).

Finally, critical reflection can be thought of as a subset of reflection, albeit with a sharper focus (Van Beveren et al., 2018). According to Fook (2015), the ability to reflect does not automatically translate to the ability to critically reflect; for this to occur, one needs to confront one's assumptions about power and legitimacy. Within the context of professional practice, critical reflection can be defined as reflection "that focuses on the power dimensions of assumptive thinking, and therefore on how practice might change in order to bring about change in the social situations in which professionals work" (Fook, 2015, pp. 441-442).

The Learning Organisation and Communities of Practice

Boud (2010) suggests that reflective practice needs an expanded definition, beyond those previously considered in individual reflection, that takes into account new professional practices that are team-based and can help in developing the learning organisation. Senge (1997) defines the learning organisation as an organisation that has an adaptive capacity to change. One of the critical disciplines that the learning organisation must possess is team learning, which focuses on the learning activities of the group rather than on the development of team processes (Senge, 1997). In such an organisation, employees are able to continuously create, acquire, and transfer knowledge, which enables the organisation overall to adapt to unpredictable future events more quickly (Garvin et al., 2008). Boud et al. (2006) emphasise that reflection is a key tool for the learning organisation since "reflection on work experience is becoming a key to fostering work outcomes" (p. 4). For this reason, Garvin et al. (2008) argue that organisations must engrain within the corporate culture a time for reflection that allows teams to diagnose problems and learn from collective experiences.

While teams work together towards achieving a specific organisational goal, they are mainly task-driven and may, or may not, engage in collaborative learning

(Farnsworth et al., 2016). On the other hand, a community of practice is more of a learning partnership where members are explicitly focused on knowledge sharing and collective professional development rather than task completion (Andrew et al., 2008). The term “communities of practice” was originally conceptualised by Lave and Wenger (1991) who argued that learning is a social process, not an individual one. They described communities of practice as social environments where people share knowledge through interaction (Andrew et al., 2008) which can provide a supportive context for learning and reflective practice. According to Wenger (1998), learning in a community of practice occurs through legitimate peripheral participation, an iterative process where newcomers gradually become full participants in the community. This process highlights the role of social engagement and mutual negotiation of meaning as central to the learning process, which involves not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also the development of identity within the community (Farnsworth et al., 2016).

Reflective practice is deeply embedded within communities of practice, as members do not merely reflect on their personal experiences, but rather, they share their reflections with other members (Wenger, 1998). This sharing helps create a collaborative learning environment (Wenger, 1998). For example, this could be manifested through members discussing major events, sharing experiences of success and failure, or systematically documenting reflections for collective consideration.

Collective reflection within communities of practice can significantly contribute to the evolution of shared resources and collective knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As members articulate and share their reflections, the community collectively identifies best practices and discerns key lessons (Lesser & Storck, 2001). As a result, the knowledge encapsulated within a community of practice is not static but rather, is continually refined through reflective practice (Wenger, 1998). This dynamic body of knowledge enhances the community's collective expertise, informs its future practices, and reinforces the professional identities of its members (Wenger et al., 2002).

The concept of communities of practice offers a rich framework for understanding the social and communal dimensions of reflective practice (Wenger, 1998). As such, communities of practice can be utilised as a significant platform for fostering and augmenting group reflection, contributing to both individual and collective learning and development (Boud et al., 2013).

2.6 Summary

Reflection is a critical part of professional learning (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987). In recognition of this importance, reflection has been studied extensively in a wide set of professions including education, nursing, medicine, social work, legal work, and the police sector. However, there is little to no literature that studies reflection within the specific context of corporate training. This gap in the literature is one of the reasons why I worked on this dissertation, as there is a growing body of literature that stresses the importance of researching reflection within specific contexts (Atkinson, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015; Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

In this chapter, I began by discussing how corporate training helps employees acquire additional skills and knowledge to keep up with the demands of the constantly changing global knowledge economy. I then argued that since reflection is a key element in corporate training, more research is needed into how, and if, reflection is used within this specific profession. I then moved on to discuss relevant aspects of the literature around reflection. After identifying several tensions in the literature, I presented my theoretical framework, and argued that the combination of the work of Schön and Vygotsky provides the basis for a more holistic analysis in my research, and a means to address the tensions in the literature. In the next chapter, I explain the methodology I used in my research.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explain the methodology used in this research study, which sought to answer the following research questions: How does a group of corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection in their professional practice? How do these corporate trainers engage in reflection? Can they enhance their reflective practice and if so, how? In section 3.2, I outline the research paradigm that guided my work. Section 3.3 sheds light on my positionality, encompassing my professional drive for undertaking this study and my close connection to the research participants. Section 3.4 discusses my research approach, including how I collected and analysed data.

3.2 Research Paradigm

After deciding on *what* to research, researchers must address the question of *how* to research it (Holden & Lynch, 2004). Answering this question begins with a decision regarding the paradigm that will influence the way that research knowledge is studied and interpreted (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). While there are different ways to categorise paradigms (Ponterotto, 2005), Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) classify the different paradigms into the following four main groups: positivist/post-positivist, interpretivist/constructivist, transformative, and pragmatic.

Positivism is based on a rational deterministic philosophy in which outcomes have a causal claim (Schrag, 1992). Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the basic belief of post-positivism as critical realism, in which reality is perceived to be probabilistic (rather than deterministic), and knowledge consists of probable facts or laws based on non-falsified hypotheses. The aim of inquiry in these paradigms is explanation that enables prediction and control of the phenomena, with the researcher playing the role of an expert (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Positivist and post-positivist research are mainly aligned with quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, given the need for causality and rational determinism (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

Interpretivism and constructivism share a similar approach to research. Within these two paradigms, knowledge is based on agreed on constructions that are in a process of constant revision by interpreters who can have different views based on gender, ethnic, economic, and cultural factors (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The interpretivist/constructivist researcher tends to rely on the views of the participants who are being studied while recognising the impact of the researcher's own biases and beliefs (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). In these paradigms, knowledge accumulates relatively through the process of joining complex constructions to each other and knowledge transfer "from one setting to another is [through] the provision of vicarious experience" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114).

Researchers within the transformative paradigm believe that other approaches do not adequately address important issues such as social justice and the marginalisation of certain groups (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). According to Mertens (2007), researchers within this context should recognise inequalities in society, challenge the current status, and strive to transform the injustices in the world. Mixed methods within this paradigm are essential as they provide an understanding of the experience of reality in communities that are culturally diverse and complex (Mertens, 2007).

As for the pragmatic paradigm, researchers within this context focus on the problem without committing to any specific philosophy (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Pragmatism attempts to answer questions around the how, the why, and the what (Morgan, 2014). Overall, pragmatism can be seen as concentrating on "beliefs that are more directly connected to actions" (Maxwell, 2004, p. 1051).

From these different paradigms, interpretivism closely resonates with the aims of my research. Since my overall goal was to understand the experiences of professional corporate trainers and how they respond to the issues they face through reflection, I needed an approach that would allow me to explore participants' subjective views. Within the different research paradigms, interpretivism accepts subjectivity and allows for research that results in multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

There are four key features that distinguish interpretivism from other research paradigms. The first feature is the emphasis that interpretivism places on subjectivity. Within the interpretivist paradigm, the individual's perspective is critical to understanding social phenomena since individuals interpret their world on the basis of a unique set of experiences, beliefs, and values (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The second feature is understanding through interpretation. Interpretivists argue that social phenomena can only be understood through interpreting how individuals make sense of, and construct meaning from, their unique experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The third feature is the importance of context. Interpretivists argue that social phenomena can only be understood in their specific social and historical contexts, as "every situation is unique and cannot be understood apart from its historical, cultural, and social contexts" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7). The fourth and final feature is the use of qualitative methods. Interpretivists rely extensively on qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography to understand the meaning that people attribute to social phenomena (Creswell et al., 2007). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), "qualitative research methods…allow for rich, detailed descriptions of people's experiences" (p. 2).

The interpretive methodology, according to Creswell et al. (2007), is about understanding phenomena from the perspective of an individual. In interpretivism, the major aim is understanding and reconstruction (Lincoln & Egon, 2000) and "the same institution, or the same human action, can have different meanings for different human subjects, as well as for the observing scientist" (Lee, 1991, p. 348). Indeed, making meaning out of the insights of different people is the essence of the interpretative approach, since the interpretivist researcher relies on the views of the participants who are being studied (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

3.3 Positionality

3.3.1 Introduction

Within qualitative research, there is growing acknowledgement that the values, beliefs, and theoretical knowledge of researchers will impact the way they collect and analyse data, which will in turn affect their research conclusions (Dean et al., 2018). Therefore, academic researchers should be transparent about their positionality (Dean et al., 2018) which can be defined as “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study – the community, the organization or the participant group” (Rowe, 2014, p. 2).

The expectation of positionality transparency arose from the growth of interpretivism, and its “strong acknowledgement that all researchers into human activities [bring] their own subjectivity to the research table” (Cousin, 2010, p. 9). In interpretivism, truth and knowledge are based on people’s experiences and their own interpretation of those experiences (Ryan, 2018). Interpretivists believe that knowledge is construed “from a particular stance and an available language, and that we should own up to this in explicit ways” (Cousin, 2010, p. 9). Therefore, qualitative researchers can never be completely separated from their own preconceptions, which will colour everything in their work including how they construct the research question, the way they collect and interpret data, and the conclusions they reach (Malterud, 2001; Rowe, 2014; Ryan, 2018). According to Malterud (2001), a researcher’s positionality can be established by clarifying their background, motives, perspectives, and relationship with research participants. In the next paragraphs, I will clarify my positionality by addressing these elements.

3.3.2 Personal and Professional Motivation

Having worked in corporate training for over nine years, a bias that could potentially influence the research is my pre-existing belief that corporate trainers need a formal professional development programme to guide their development. This strong belief comes from my own personal experience in the world of corporate training.

When I first joined my current company, I had never formally worked as a corporate trainer. Although I had some experience delivering learning workshops, I did not believe that I had enough training on *how* to deliver training. I was expecting that the firm I joined would provide me with a formal training programme. However, the only pre-service preparation I received was attending two one-week courses delivered by other experienced corporate trainers to observe ‘how it’s done’. I was then told that being ‘thrown into the deep end’ was the best way to learn. Indeed, 22 out of my 25 colleagues had no prior experience in teaching or corporate training before they began, and like me, they were expected to learn on the job. Only three had previously been professors in higher education institutes and knew what it was like to teach. This learning-while-doing, without any formal pre-training, is arguably the norm in most corporate training companies, as Gauld and Miller (2004) confirm that many corporate trainers are hired for their deep content knowledge in a certain subject, but without necessarily having any educational qualifications or expertise. While being thrown into the deep end certainly forced me to think and learn on my feet, the lack of formal professional development guidance made it difficult to find ways to continue to grow as a trainer. This motivated me to identify methods which could help other corporate trainers in their careers.

To deal with this bias, throughout the research, I critically examined my work and assessed if my bias was influencing my findings. In other words, I was 'reflective' about my research and constantly questioned my preconceived notions, assumptions, and beliefs.

3.3.3 Relationship With Research Participants: Insider/Outsider Status

In qualitative research, positionality should also reference the researcher's insider/outsider relationship to the research participants (Rowe, 2014). While insider/outsider status is multidimensional, a simple definition through a professional practice lens would describe insiders as researchers who study their own practice and outsiders as researchers who are studying a practice that they are not involved in (Rowe, 2014).

Chavez (2008) lists several advantages of being an insider, including "a nuanced perspective for observation, interpretation and representation; an equalized relationship between researcher and participants; expediency of rapport building; immediate legitimacy in the field; and economy to acclimating to the field" (p. 479). While some of these advantages of being an insider may be weakened as the researcher's identity shifts during interaction with participants (Labaree, 2002), "[t]he assumption that insiderness provides the researcher with greater access and deeper understanding is often true" (Labaree, 2002, p. 97), since the researcher possesses "previous knowledge that informs multiple points of access to informants and provides a head-start in interpreting the meaning of organization's language" (Labaree, 2002, p. 116).

Having worked with each of the participants for more than nine years, I enjoy an insider status that provides me with valuable insights and understanding of the research context (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). However, a potential downside that can result from close association to the group is limited perspective. This limited perspective can lead to faulty assumptions about the beliefs, values, and behaviours of the participants (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). To address this potential bias, during the interviews, I used the same set of questions for each participant and was careful to avoid asking leading questions. When analysing and interpreting the data, I looked for corroborating findings from multiple research participants.

3.4 Research Approach

3.4.1 Data Collection

Empirical research can be defined as the understanding of a specific phenomenon through the process of collecting, analysing, and interpreting data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Lincoln & Egon, 2000). Depending on the data needed to respond to the research question, the researcher chooses a qualitative method when textual data is required, a quantitative method when numerical data is needed, or a mixed method when both textual and numerical data are necessary (Bryman, 2016).

Interpretivism calls for a strong interaction between the researcher and participant over an extended period of time (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This "naturalistic inquiry leads to qualitative research methods such as in-depth face-to-face interviewing and participant observation" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 132). For the purposes of my research, I collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with nine corporate trainers followed by a focus group that included three corporate trainers whom I had previously interviewed.

Conducting semi-structured interviews prior to the focus group offers two main advantages. To begin with, one-on-one interviews can facilitate a depth of understanding that remains unaffected by group dynamics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Additionally, themes briefly touched upon in the individual interviews can be expanded upon in the focus group discussions, enriching the data (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). However, opting for interviews before focus groups poses certain challenges. One concern is that initial results from interviews can unintentionally skew the researcher's perspective and may lead focus group participants to perceive some opinions as already validated, which could limit the diversity of views expressed (Morgan, 1996). Moreover, when conducted first, focus groups often unearth overarching themes which can then be probed more deeply in subsequent interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Due to scheduling difficulties brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, I started with one-on-one interviews. To mitigate the disadvantages of this sequence, I ensured that the focus group questions were exploratory and did not include specific questions based on themes that emerged from the interviews (Morgan, 1996). Furthermore, I took deliberate steps during focus group facilitation to remain impartial, ensuring that each participant's viewpoint was equally considered and valued (Morgan, 1996).

In constructing the interview guides for my data collection methods, I followed the stages suggested by Kallio et al. (2016). Guided by a review of studies that explored reflection conceptualisation, and informed by my research questions, I constructed an initial interview guide with the aim of eliciting participants' personal experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). For example, as I was interested in gaining insights on the professional development of corporate trainers, the initial guide included the following questions: How do you learn and develop in your professional practice? What actions do you take to improve and develop? I then conducted a pilot interview which allowed me to test the "coverage and relevance of the content…to identify the possible need to reformulate questions" (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2960). This resulted in changes to my initial guide as I discarded irrelevant questions and made others more concise. I then developed a similar guide for the focus group that included a subset of questions that elicited the most relevant responses to my research questions. The final interview guides for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group can be found in Appendix B.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the semi-structured interviews, as well as the focus group, were conducted on Zoom. While the dynamics of using online platforms differ from face-to-face interactions, Janghorban et al. (2014) as well as Lo (2020) argue that the core content and authenticity of participants' responses remain consistent across both modalities, implying its limited influence on the findings. The Zoom meetings were audio recorded and transcribed using an intelligent verbatim transcription method that omits fillers (such as 'uh' and 'hmm'), as these are affirmations rather than data interpretations (Sandelowski, 1994). Data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The aim of thematic analysis is to analytically examine narrative materials from life stories (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Text from these stories is then broken down into smaller content parts and then submitted to descriptive treatment (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Throughout this process, the researcher searches for and identifies themes and topics displayed in common by a set of interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and produces a detailed account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4.2 Ethical Considerations

Throughout my research, I adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the School of Education Ethics Committee. As required, I applied for ethical approval and submitted a Plain Language Statement (PLS), a consent form, and the questions and themes that would be included as part of the interviews and focus group discussions. All interviews were pseudonymised and I took steps to ensure that information obtained from interviewees was not disclosed in any way that might identify individuals, either deliberately or accidentally (Wiles et al., 2008). All data collected during the study was securely stored on university-approved systems. The interview and focus group questions and themes can be found in Appendix B, while the PLS and consent form are provided in Appendix E.

3.4.3 Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

The most important factor for recruiting participants is selecting interviewees who can provide insights into the research area and are willing and available to participate in the research (Rowley, 2012). While Rowley (2012) states that finding participants can be a difficult and time-consuming process, and that plenty of time should be allowed for it, my experience was different as the target research participants were colleagues and appeared enthusiastic about participating in my research. At the time I decided to start the interviews, there were 25 corporate trainers working in my company. All of the trainers were male, and they ranged in age from 40 to 60. I constructed a table with the names of each participant, the training sector they work in, their availability to participate in the study as estimated by me, and their age. My goal was to try to include participants with varying backgrounds and training expertise. Unfortunately, at the time of conducting the research, the corporate training company that the research participants worked in did not employ any female corporate trainers. This is a common issue throughout the region in many corporate training companies, which historically have mainly employed male trainers.

After developing a table with the list of potential research participants, I then contacted the nine candidates I thought were most likely to agree to participate in my study by email and asked if they would be willing to be part of my research study. After I received their positive responses, I sent them a plain language statement (PLS) and a consent form that they all signed and returned. Appendix D includes a background of the nine research participants. Examples of the consent form and PLS can be found in Appendix E.

3.4.4 Research Methods

Introduction

In the next sections, I outline the research methods I used, starting with a series of semi-structured interviews that were conducted in English. I then explain why I included a focus group in my research, followed by a brief discussion of the method I used to transcribe the interviews and focus group.

Interviews

Interviews are useful for “understanding experiences, opinions, attitudes, values, and processes” (Rowley, 2012, p. 262). They are a powerful tool in the researcher’s toolkit as they allow researchers to investigate people’s views in great depth (Kvale, 2007) while exploring the construction of meanings in a real-world environment (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Sampson (2004) argues that since conducting interviews can be challenging, researchers should first conduct a pilot interview to refine their interview questions and techniques, as this will result in a better data collection approach.

In line with this guidance, I conducted a pilot interview, which identified issues with the time required for the interview and the style of my questions. Regarding time spent in the interview, the PLS that I sent to participants indicated that the interview should take no longer than 45 minutes. However, the pilot interview took longer than I had initially anticipated, as we reached the 40-minute mark without covering all questions. My choice then was to either conclude the interview or ask the participant if he would be willing to conduct another interview at a different date. Fortunately, the participant was interested in the topic and suggested that we continue the discussion for another 15 minutes, after which we could schedule another interview, if needed, at a different date.

My second key learning was the way I asked questions. During the pilot interview, the discussion veered towards the benefit of coaching corporate trainers on reflective writing. The question I meant to ask was: “Who should we target first for reflective writing sessions?” However, rather than asking this straightforward question, I spent more than a minute rambling about the topic. The response of the participant was: “Okay, so what’s your question?” As a result, I noted that my questions should be clear and concise.

After making changes based on insights from the pilot interview, the subsequent interviews went more smoothly, with each interview lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. In addition, I spoke less and listened more, and as I did more interviews, I felt that the process became even smoother.

Focus Group Interview

Lambert and Loiselle (2008) note that focus groups, when combined with interviews, can enhance data richness and contribute to knowledge production and synthesis. Similarly, the use of interviews and focus groups can result in a triangulation of methods that can help develop a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena (Carter et al., 2014). Furthermore, group dynamics within focus groups can generate an additional layer of information that can be helpful to data collected from other sources (Gill et al., 2008).

After conducting the nine semi-structured interviews, I selected three interviewees on the basis of their willingness to participate in a focus group, their availability to meet, and the richness of the data that I gathered from the initial semi-structured interview. After conducting the focus group, I found that the above advantages were indeed apparent, as participants expanded on several themes mentioned in the individual interviews. This added to the richness of data while also serving as a triangulation point that confirmed data from the interviews.

Reading and Transcribing

For transcription, I used an intelligent verbatim style, or a denaturalism approach, “in which grammar is corrected, interview noise (e.g., stutters, pauses, etc.) is removed and nonstandard accents (i.e. non-majority) are standardized” (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1273). This denaturalism approach is supported by Halcomb and Davidson (2006) who argue that it is not always necessary to transcribe interview data verbatim. In addition, Sandelowski (1994) points out that the majority of qualitative approaches, excluding narrative analysis, do not benefit from fillers such as ‘uh’ and ‘hmm’, since these fillers are affirmations rather than data interpretations. Similarly, Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) argue that the real issue facing researchers in transcription is “how to selectively reduce the data in a way that preserves the possibility of different analyses and interpretations” (p. 69). This data reduction can be done in a style that is described by Bloom (1993) as a lean transcription approach that allows for data interpretation.

As well as considering the transcription style and detail, I noted that the transcription process itself allowed me to start analysing and evaluating the data I collected. Bird (2005) states that transcription is an integral element of data interpretation and enables the researcher to think about how data relates to the issues that are being explored. As I was transcribing, key themes started emerging and I started making notes on preliminary topics that needed further exploration.

The process of transcription is a daunting task. A one-hour interview can take six to seven hours to transcribe (Dörnyei, 2007; Halcomb & Davidson, 2006) and can generate 50 pages of transcript text (Dörnyei, 2007). As a result, some researchers choose to utilise the services of professional transcribers. However, I found that transcribing interviews myself helped me in understanding, analysing, and interpreting the data. Kvale (2007) states that “researchers who transcribe their own interviews…will already have started the analysis of the meaning of what was said” (p. 4).

3.4.5 Data Analysis

Rowley (2012) states that “data analysis can be a confusing and daunting process” (p. 267). Creswell and Poth (2017) liken the data analysis process to a spiral, whereby one goes round and round until the centre is reached. Given these factors, a researcher enters with data, circles several times around, and then exits with a narrative (Creswell et al., 2007).

While there are several analysis methods that can be used, such as ethnography, grounded theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, phenomenographic and content analysis, there is considerable overlap among them in terms of methods, procedures, and techniques, which could result in inconsistency and a lack of coherence (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, researchers must be aware of the features of the approach they have chosen in order to improve the consistency between the study aim and the method of data analysis, and the validity of the study as a whole (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

For the purposes of my research, I used thematic analysis, which is a popular qualitative analytic method as it offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to the analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative descriptive approach that is described as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The aim of thematic analysis is to analytically examine narrative materials from life stories. The text from these stories is then broken down into smaller content parts and then submitted to descriptive treatment (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In thematic analysis, the researcher searches for themes that occur frequently across a set of interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and produces a detailed account of the data collected by synthesising and summarising these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Figure 4 below, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87), describes the process of data analysis:

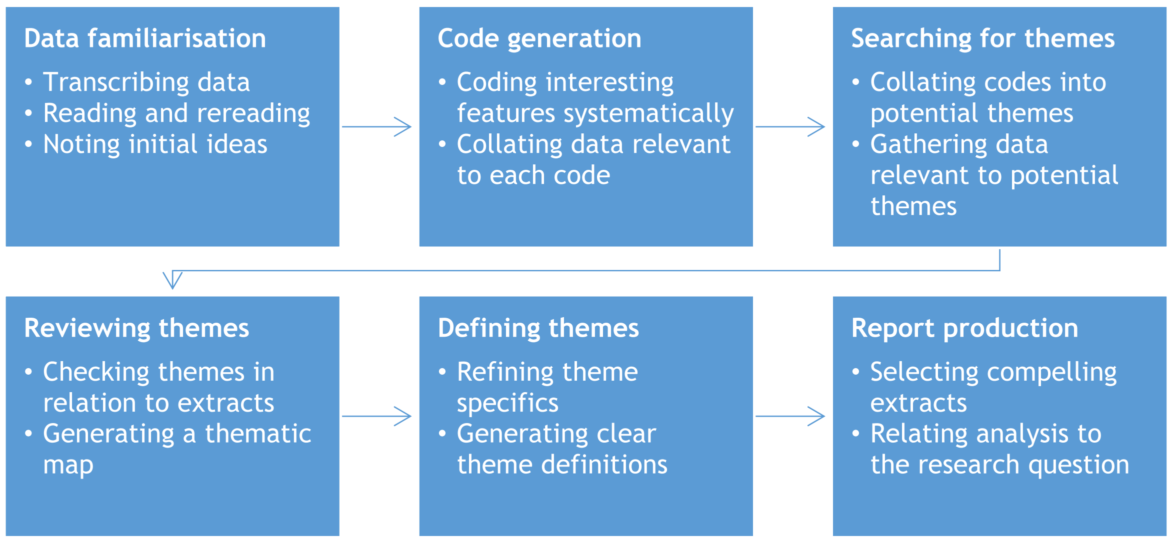


Figure 4: Process of thematic data analysis.

In interpreting the data using thematic analysis, researchers can use an inductive approach or a deductive approach. Inductive analysis is used in cases where there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon and coded categories are derived directly from the textual data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In this approach, themes are strongly connected to the data (Patton, 1990, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the identified themes do not necessarily resemble the original questions that the research participants answered. Inductive analysis is driven by the data as it is a "process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). On the other hand, deductive analysis can be considered a top-down method that is driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area, and is therefore more extensively driven by the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of thematic analysis provides more detail about some aspects of the data while providing less detail for the overall dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Overall, deductive analysis is used if the general aim of the thematic analysis is to test a previous theory or to compare categories at different times (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the choice of deductive versus inductive approach will depend on why and how the data is being coded. In my research, using an inductive approach would mean reading and rereading the data for any themes related to the effect of reflective thinking on work practices. My coding would be diverse and I would not necessarily concentrate on any themes that previous research has identified. On the other hand, utilising a deductive method would mean that my coding would concentrate on a particular aspect of reflective thinking. This would be more likely to lead to a number of themes connected to the original starting point.

For my analysis, I used a deductive/inductive hybrid approach. As Rowley (2012) indicates, many studies are both deductive/inductive as they are informed by theory as well as practice. Similarly, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) argue that a hybrid approach provides more rigour to the qualitative analysis, as results are driven by both data and theories, which allows a top-down and bottom-up approach to developing themes. I expand more on the deductive/inductive approach I used in the section below entitled “Step 3: Searching for Themes”.

A decision I had to make before analysing the data was whether I should use computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo. While CAQDAS has been available since the 1980s, researchers can face difficulties in using it (Zamawe, 2015). However, once mastered, packages such as NVivo can provide researchers with a structure for creating codes and themes while ensuring “easy, effective and efficient coding which makes retrieval easier” (Zamawe, 2015, p. 14). In addition, NVivo can “improve the rigour of the analysis process by validating (or not) some of the researcher’s own impressions of the data” (Welsh, 2002, p. 8). On the other hand, understanding how themes are related to each other can be just as easily done using a large piece of paper with written cards (Welsh, 2002). In addition, there is a danger that features in NVivo might “serve to distance the researcher from the context of the data” (Zamawe, 2015, p. 14).

Given the time investment required to make full use of NVivo, I decided to use a manual approach in my thematic analysis.

The following is a summary of the process I used for analysing my data:

Step 1: Data Familiarisation

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), researchers need to immerse themselves in the data by reading and rereading the data in an "active way – searching for meanings, patterns, and so on" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Following this advice, and after conducting each interview, I listened to the audio recording of the interview twice, and then began transcribing the interview using a denaturalism approach. During the transcription process, I started forming initial ideas about possible codes and writing notes on the margins of the transcription page. For example, in the pilot interview, I asked Sami about the challenges he faced in training. When transcribing his response, I noted in the margins that he was speaking about participants who were disengaged:

Transcription	Note
Sami: When we, when I, started with Meirc, the people who attended training, were not necessarily there for training reasons, or for any academic improvement. Some of them were there for tourism, some were there for the per diem, which they cashed, some were there for the knowledge and the, you know, the acquisition of I guess, the new information. Some of them were there to escape from the, you know, boring corporate environment. So that mix, trying to get people interested in what we were doing, so that was challenge number one.	This seems to be a discussion about disengagement of participants (possible code/theme).

Figure 5. Example of interview transcription and research notes and comments.

Another challenge I confronted was the use of Arabic words by participants. While all interviews were conducted in English, all research participants spoke Arabic as a first language. During the interview, I told participants that they could speak in Arabic if they were more comfortable expressing themselves in that language. While none of them used Arabic extensively, there were several Arabic terms that that they used. Breiteneder et al. (2006) refer to this as code switching, which is an intrinsic element of speech used by bilingual and multilingual people. For example, when I asked Ramsey about how he ended up as a corporate trainer, his response was peppered with several Arabic language terms. I transcribed these directly in Arabic, and then translated them into English.

> *You know, a few weeks maybe after that, I send him my resume and he says, خلص (In Arabic: finished), too late, they already hired another other person. But they say that they need, like a finance trainer. I said, like, what do you mean, finance trainer? (laughing) يالله (In Arabic: Let's go) Go ahead شوف شوف (In Arabic: See see) What can we do? And from there, basically, I get the interview over the phone, they brought me into work. I kind of liked the idea of having to do training, then specifically moved (laughing), started training. (Ramsey)*

Step 2: Code Generation

After transcribing all nine interviews, as well as the focus group, I reread all the transcripts along with the notes that I had made in the margin. During this phase, a note in one transcript would make me go back to a previous transcript and change or add a note. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that coding is a discontinuous process whereby one jumps between documents resulting in new codes and ideas. After going over the transcripts for a second time, I started the process of coding. In coding, I would highlight an entry in the transcript with a certain colour and then write a code that would describe that entry. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), these codes are a basic element that describes a feature of the data that is interesting to the researcher and can be analysed in a meaningful way. The following is an example from the interview with Jamal, who was responding to a question I asked about what corporate trainers need to do to develop.

Transcription	Initial Codes
Jamal: They need to work on things related to their body language and movement during a live, face-to-face session. They need to know how to open a training session as an introduction, what are the main elements to include there. They need to know how to structure a learning session or an hour, an hour and a half, know how much lecturing, how many activities. They need to know how to end or close, you know, their training. So there's a, let me say a number of technical knowledge that they need to build and technical vis-	Delivery Delivery Technical knowledge Behavioural knowledge

a-vis, the training industry as a trainer, but then there's also the behavioural aspect that they need to build.	

Figure 6. Example of identifying initial codes from interview transcriptions.

After I completed the initial coding for all the transcripts, I reviewed the codes and sometimes changed them based on other transcripts, or added notes about potential themes and categories. For example, in the above interview excerpt, the initial code I used was 'delivery'. However, after completing initial coding for all the interviews, I started to see an aspect where corporate trainers were also performers on stage. Therefore, the initial code of 'delivery' became 'performer' and the potential theme was 'skills'.

Transcription	Initial Code	Updated Code	Potential Theme
Jamal: They need to work on things related to their body language and movement during a live, face-to-face session.	Delivery	Performer	Skills

Figure 7. Example of updating codes and identifying potential themes.

Step 3: Searching for Themes

Initially, I took a deductive approach by creating themes that were identified through previous research. The following are examples of themes from the literature that I kept in mind when analysing my data:

Themes from Literature
Barriers to reflection (Boud et al., 2013)
Critical incidents (Brookfield, 1995)
Ethical considerations (Benade, 2012; McGarr & Moody, 2010)
Group reflection (Boud, 2010)
Levels of reflection (Fook, 2015; Mezirow, 1998)
Linking reflection to action (Beauchamp, 2015; Rose, 2016)
Professional identity (Farrell, 2011)
Reflective tools and techniques (Jasper, 2016; O'Connell & Dyment, 2013)
Temporal component to reflection (Schön, 1983)

Figure 8. List of potential themes that were identified in the literature review.

However, since I was taking a hybrid deductive/inductive approach, I also wanted to let the data speak for itself. For examples, on closer examination of the participants' responses, several codes/themes emerged that I had not previously reviewed in the literature, such as the role of mentorship, emotion, passion, and triggers of reflection such as pain.

The following is an excerpt from the codes I generated from the interviews. The highlighted codes are those that I believed were similar and could potentially form a category or theme.

Code	Source
Adaptability	Sami
A-Game (Maximum effort)	Sami
Anticipate issues through reflection before action	Sami
Best effort	Sami
Bridging the gap through feedback	Sami
Passion	Sami
Adjust according to participant needs	Fadi
Engaging with people	Jamal
Flexibility	Jamal
Commitment	Jamal
Positivity	Jamal
Need to care	Jamal

Figure 9. Excerpt of similar codes that could be grouped together to form one theme.

This allowed me to group similar codes into categories and then form these categories into themes. The following is an example of the process of moving from codes to categories to themes:

Code	Category	Theme
Adaptability	Flexibility	Corporate Trainer Qualities
A-Game (Maximum effort)	Commitment	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Best effort	Commitment	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Passion	Commitment	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Adjust to participant needs	Flexibility	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Flexibility	Flexibility	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Commitment	Commitment	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Positivity	Commitment	Corporate Trainer Qualities
Need to care	Commitment	Corporate Trainer Qualities

Figure 10. Example of grouping codes into categories to generate a theme.

The result of this analysis was an initial theme map that included six themes:

Figure 11. Initial themes identified from participant interviews.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

After I created the initial themes, I started the process of reviewing and refining them. This is a necessary step as some themes might not have enough data to support them, while others might to be too large and will need to be divided into sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then started mapping codes to each theme, and I discovered that some themes were too large and needed further segmentation into sub-themes. This often happens in thematic analysis, as themes can be further broken down into sub-themes in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the patterns and connections in the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). After several iterations, five main themes, each with related sub-themes, emerged. These are listed and outlined in the next step.

Step 5: Defining Themes

The fifth step in the thematic process is refining theme specifics and generating clear definitions. The following table includes a definition of the final themes along with their associated sub-themes.

Theme Name	Definition	Sub-themes
1.Operationalising reflection	This theme describes the active process of reflection within the context of the corporate training field by identifying "how" corporate trainers reflect and what they actually do	1.1 Triggers of reflection 1.2 Mental replay for immediate improvement 1.3 Shaping practice through continuous improvement
2.The temporal nature of reflection	This theme describes "when" corporate trainers reflect, which includes reflection about the past, the present, and the future	2.1 Reflection before action 2.2 Reflection in-action 2.3 Reflection after action
3.On becoming a master reflector	This theme describes the participants' views of the characteristics of effective reflectors, the different levels of reflection, and tools that can aid in the process of reflection	3.1 Characteristics of a master reflector 3.2 Levels of reflection 3.3 Tools to aid reflection
4.The professional identity of corporate trainers	This theme describes how corporate trainers view their professional identity and the challenges they face within their profession	4.1 Naturally talented performers 4.2 Challenges faced 4.3 Characteristics of effective trainers
5.Building communities of practice	This theme discusses the need to develop a professional community of practice where different corporate trainers assist each other to learn and develop	5.1 Training new corporate trainers 5.2 Sharing knowledge 5.3 Developing the learning organisation

Figure 12. Definition of final themes with related sub-themes.

Step 6: Report Production

The sixth and final step in the thematic process is report production, which includes selecting compelling extracts and relating the analysis to the research questions. This report is provided in chapters 4 and 5.

4 Findings – Part One

4.1 Introduction

As discussed in earlier chapters, previous research has extensively noted the importance of reflection for professional competence (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987). However, within the corporate training profession, there is little to no in-depth research on the notion of reflection, how it is understood, if it is used, and how it is practised. This is a problem, as it has been shown to be important to research reflection within specific contexts and settings, since various professions have different approaches and needs (Atkinson, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015; Dimova & Loughran, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

Given the lack of academic research in the area of reflection that focuses on corporate trainers in general, and UAE corporate trainers in particular, and in light of the importance of reflection to the development of professionals, the aim of my dissertation was to explore how a group of corporate trainers in the UAE understood and used reflection by answering the following research questions: How does a group of corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection in their professional practice? How do these corporate trainers engage in reflection? Can they enhance their reflective practice and if so, how?

In chapters four and five, I present the findings from nine semi-structured interviews, as well as a focus group, that I conducted with UAE based corporate trainers. A summary background of the research participants can be found in Appendix D. The findings from the interviews with the research participants are summarised in the following five themes: 1) Operationalising reflection in corporate training, 2) The temporal nature of reflection in corporate training, 3) On becoming a master reflector, 4) Building communities of practice, and 5) The professional identity of corporate trainers. These themes were derived from the interview data through systematic coding and analytical thinking following the process I outlined in section 3.4.5.

In this chapter, I discuss the first three themes as well as their corresponding sub-themes, which are illustrated in the following figure:

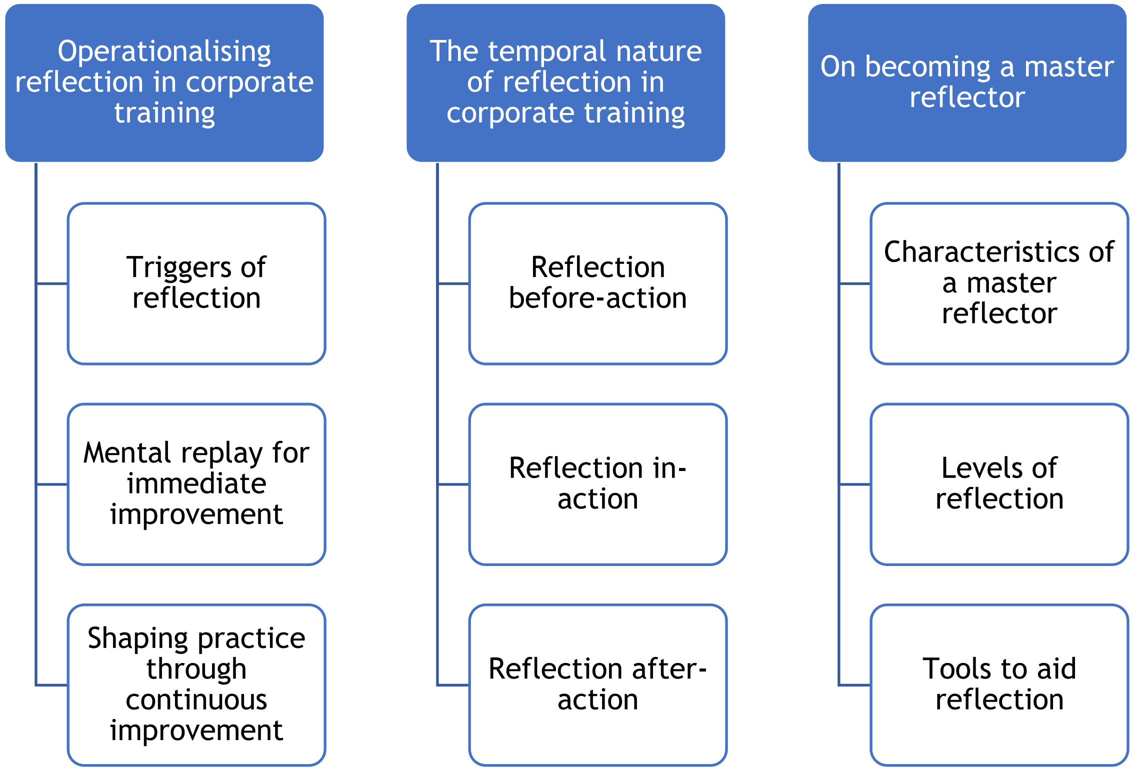


Figure 13. Themes and sub-themes part 1.

In chapter five, I will discuss the remaining two themes: 4) The professional identity of corporate trainers and 5) Building communities of practice.

4.2 Theme 1: Operationalising Reflection in Corporate Training

In this section, I discuss the first theme, which relates to the active process of reflection within the context of the corporate training field. I have divided this theme into three sub-themes. The first sub-theme discusses the immediate reasons that trigger the process of reflection. The second sub-theme describes how the research participants reflect and the process they follow when reflecting. The third sub-theme outlines how the research participants' engagement in the process of reflection impacts and shapes their practice in the long-term.

4.2.1 Triggers of Reflection

Rogers (2001) argued that there are antecedent conditions to reflection, in the form of triggers that are the immediate cause of the process of reflection. These triggers can be an unusual situation (Rogers, 2001), values-conflict (Schön, 1983), or a state of puzzlement (Loughran, 2002). In this sub-theme, I outline the participants' immediate reasons for reflection. Was there a certain incident that caused them to reflect? What triggered that process?

Critical Incidents

Sami was the oldest research participant, and the one with the most experience, having worked in corporate training for over 25 years. He described how critical incidents can trigger the process of reflection and prompt professionals to revisit how they approach their profession. Sami described a critical incident that happened in his first year of training. On the first day of one of his sessions, he asked participants to introduce themselves to others by creating a "wanted" poster of themselves on a flip chart, similar to the Wild-West posters in American cowboy movies. One participant objected, on the grounds that he perceived the exercise to be childish and a waste of time. Sami stood his ground and insisted on the participant completing the exercise.

> *One of the participants interrupted me while I was giving instructions and said, "This is for kids and we're not kids. Let's just go around the room and introduce ourselves professionally". I told him, "No, I'm sorry. I'm the trainer here and you have to follow the instructions of the trainer." (Sami)*

Later that day, Sami received negative feedback from his company's chairman about this incident. It is worthwhile to note that the participant's objection did not cause the process of reflection. Nor was it necessarily the negative feedback that he received from the chairman. Rather, it was Sami's realisation that he was disappointed with himself for not doing better. This negative emotion caused him to reflect purposefully, which ultimately led to a change in his professional practice:

> *No sooner than the day ended, a fax was sent to the chairman. I remember the words he used. He said, "We felt like we were furniture being moved around the room and had absolutely no say in what we could or could not do". He gave me the dressing down in private. I was disappointed with myself. The participant was right. So [I realised], from now on, I need to start working on my flexibility and adaptability and resilience, and most importantly, my emotional quotient. (Sami)*

Pain and Self-Blame

Idris, a corporate trainer and certified executive coach in his mid-50s, argued that pain, self-blame, and a feeling of not having lived up to his own personal expectations are the reasons for engaging in the process of reflection. For Idris, a negative emotion that he described as pain is a major trigger. This pain, which he probably first starts feeling on a subconscious level, is not necessarily of known origins. As Idris investigates the source of this negative emotion, he starts "relooking" at his approach that day and sees the need to observe himself from a different angle by "getting out of his head". This allows him to eventually conclude that the pain he feels is caused by dissatisfaction with his performance.

> *It is caused by pain and self-blame. This is when I remember the whole approach about that day and ask, "Why am I feeling pain? What's going on?" That means there's something there that I need to relook at, or to do differently, to change the perception. It made me realise that I need to get out of my head, as they say, and ask, "Why am I feeling bad about this?" Well, because I didn't deliver to a certain expectation I had about this. (Idris)*

For Idris, negative emotions are an indicator that there is something "wrong" with the way he is working, and as result, the "direction" that he is heading in needs to change. He believes that these indicators are trying to tell us something by delivering a message that we can only receive if we are willing to "listen":

> *If you're feeling negative emotions, know there's something that you need to think about. So just listening to what those indicators that we have inside are basically telling us. Are things going the right way for us or the desired way? Or are they going in the wrong direction? (Idris)*

When Things Go Wrong

Reflection can also be triggered when "things go wrong". Rami, a corporate trainer in his 40s who has bachelor's and master's degrees in education, argued that unwanted outcomes are a major trigger of reflection by stating that reflection is "especially" caused by things going wrong. While there was no mention of negative emotions, Rami seemed to be describing a feeling of dissatisfaction with the results of his efforts similar to what Sami and Idris mentioned.

Especially when things go wrong. There are several moments of reflection that I have after the training where I think I could have provided more examples or I could have had done more relevant activities. (Rami)

While Idris focused on emotions, he also mentioned that "something going wrong" is a pre-trigger that leads to negative emotions, which eventually cause reflection. To Idris, when something goes wrong, we are naturally wired to recognise that there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

I think it happens a lot of the times in the moment. What I mean by that is that you interact with somebody, and something goes wrong one way or the other and it triggers some emotions in you. And I think we all have that inbuilt intelligence within us to tell us that something went wrong. (Idris)

Challenges

Other than negative emotions, or something going wrong, facing a challenge is another trigger for reflection. Jamal, a corporate trainer in his early 40s with a background in educational technology, mentioned that being faced with a challenge during training is a trigger for reflection. Examples of such challenges include a difficult question from a participant, where the answer is not necessarily clear to him; or a projector not working as expected. He also included the moments when he realises that a certain training exercise did not have the intended learning effect. This is similar to what others mentioned as a feeling of dissatisfaction with the result of their work which triggers reflection.

When you're delivering training and you face a challenge, the first thing you have to think of is how can you overcome that particular challenge. So, it's at that moment where you're really focused on solving that challenge, whether it's a question from a participant, whether something related to technology that suddenly dies on you, or whether it is related to a case study that did not allow participants to get the learning that you wanted them to get. (Jamal)

Rami agreed with the notion of challenges as a trigger of reflection and described challenges as problems that needed to be solved. For him, the only trigger of reflection is when we are faced with something that is not working as expected. As an example, he spoke about a training session where he was told that his style was not engaging, and his exercises were irrelevant. For Rami, this was a "problem" that needed to be addressed, which triggered the process of thinking about the problem and how to solve it.

> *We reflect only when we have a problem. Let me give you an example. I was giving a course on business development and after the first break, the training manager called me and said: "Your pace is too slow, your examples are not relevant, and the energy is really down". So I had to think about doing something. (Rami)*

Adam is a corporate trainer in his 50s, with a background in engineering, who specialises in delivering courses on project management and contract administration. He mentioned that reflection is caused by a degree of uncertainty regarding his effectiveness. For Adam, doubt emerges when he feels that a participant has not clearly understood a certain message. This doubt is perhaps caused by a certain feeling he has about the participant, whether it is the participant's body language or facial expression. To him, the trigger for reflection seems to be uncertainty regarding his effectiveness in delivering a certain learning topic.

> *You go back and ask yourself, "Did they like that? Did they understand what I meant? Maybe I wasn't effective in trying to get the message through." (Adam)*

Overall, participants mentioned that reflection is caused by negative emotions, dissatisfaction with the result of their efforts, and challenges or problems that needed a solution.

4.2.2 Mental Replay for Immediate Improvement

In this sub-theme, I present the perspective of the research participants regarding their active engagement in the process of reflection and the reasons for this engagement. This theme deals with the *how* and *why* of reflection by outlining the way corporate trainers describe the process of reflection and the reasons they engage in this process.

Sami described reflection as a process that starts with carving out a specific time and ensuring that he is secluded from others in order to concentrate on his own actions without interruptions. To Sami, this individualised and highly personal time is an important aspect of reflection, as he placed emphasis on the words "alone" and “by yourself”. For Sami, without this seclusion, reflection could not really happen in the right way. The next step in the process is visualising what actually happened by “playing back” the day, as if the day were a video that could be “stopped” on demand. This pause occurs at specific moments of interest where Sami feels that he did not perform his best. The next step is an “asking” phase in which Sami poses questions to himself about how those moments of interest could have occurred differently and how he could have altered his actions in a way that could have resulted in a more beneficial outcome.

> *Sitting down, really alone, by yourself and playing back the day and stopping at those instances where your interaction was taking place and asking yourself: how could I have done that better? (Sami)*

Chad is a corporate trainer in his early 40s who started out as a lawyer, then moved into human resource management, and then finally into corporate training. He described reflection as a process of “self-evaluation” in which he questions himself about certain events of the day that did not necessarily go according to plan. To Chad, these moments are where he “goes back to himself”, visualises or “sees” certain moments and then ponders whether he should have put more effort and “gone the additional extra mile” or whether he should have acted “differently”. For Chad, this activity is also a process of learning, especially when he believes that something went wrong or what actually happened could have been done differently and resulted in a better outcome.

> *I do a self-evaluation, usually. I go back to myself, and I reflect. What did I learn? Or, what happened during the day? Did I do something wrong? Did I need to put the additional extra mile? Can it be better? (Chad)*

The above comment from Chad was taken from a semi-structured interview. However, Chad was also involved in the focus group discussion, in which he described the process of reflection as “reinventing moments” by looking at a “reflection of reality” such as in a mirror or water. To Chad, it seems that the process of reflection was an attempt to reconstruct reality through the lens of the person who is going through the process of reflection.

> *It's similar to seeing myself in the mirror or seeing my reflection in the water. However, it's not the reality, but I am reinventing the moment that happened that day, to see what happened. Did they get it [the training] in the right way? Can I do better? (Chad)*

Ramsey is a corporate trainer in his 50s who specialises in teaching accounting and finance courses. He also described the activity of reflection as an attempt to "go back" into the past. Similar to Chad, Ramsey's process of reflection includes an attempt to visually reconstruct events as they actually happened. For Ramsey, this activity includes posing questions to himself and asking if he could have done things in a "different way":

> *Reflection, from my side, is basically trying to go back and see. How did I handle this situation? How can I maybe do it in a different way? (Ramsey)*

Visualising events in order to question how actions could have been done differently is a common thread in the context of *how* research participants engaged in reflection. Rami described "seeing" past events as bringing these events "back into perspective". For Rami, it was as if these events were compartmentalised and stored somewhere else, and therefore, needed to be taken out of storage and brought back into the light for a clearer "perspective". Similar to Sami, Chad, and Ramsey, the purpose of Rami's visualisation is to replay the events while thinking about how outcomes could have been "different" if he had taken an alternative course of action. However, Rami expressed that a different course of action does not always seem warranted, even if the outcome was not favourable, as he described the process as "checking" if a different course of action would have been possible. It seems that to Rami, the process of reflection is about *considering* if an alternative course of action would have been possible.

> *To see, to bring it back to perspective, and to check what I could have done differently. That's mainly what happens. (Rami)*

Younes is a corporate trainer in his 50s who has a doctorate in business administration and taught at the university level. He compared the process of reflection to the "rewind" of a movie in order to "replay" certain moments. Similar to Sami, Younes began discussing reflection by first noting that reflection happens while he is alone in his car after a training session. He then spoke about reflection in terms of “thinking” about the training session and then going back in time to reconstruct events. During this thinking phase, different ideas will “click” for him, such as the use of different exercises in order to improve future training sessions:

> *Now, that could be a little bit of thinking in the car, probably on the way back, like kind of a rewind, a replay…. Any particular idea that comes to me regarding a certain part in the training that I have covered today, maybe sometimes a new idea clicks into my mind and I want to try it the next time. This exercise will be replaced by another exercise…. This is a reflection of your own training and how you can improve it for the next time. (Younes)*

Adam described the *how* of reflection as a process whereby he seeks to “go back”. This is followed by asking himself questions regarding how “effective” the training session was in terms of delivering the main “message” he intended. For Adam, the questions he asked himself revolved around his participants and whether he was successful in achieving the learning objectives of that particular training session:

> *Yeah, you go back. Did they like that? Did they understand what I meant? Why did that happen? Maybe I wasn’t effective in trying to get the message through. (Adam)*

In this sub-theme, participants described reflection as a thought process that is a mental replay or a rewind, the purpose of which is to pause at significant moments and question oneself about what could have been done better. In other words, reflection was described as a process of going back in time and visualising what happened and thinking about what could have been done differently.

4.2.3 Shaping Practice Through Continuous Improvement

In the first sub-theme, I discussed the triggers for reflection. In the second sub-theme, I outlined the perspective of the research participants regarding their active engagement in the process of reflection and the reasons for this engagement. In this third sub-theme, I present the perspective of the research participants regarding the long-term effect of reflection and how reflection can shape and change their professional practice.

Chad described corporate trainers who reflect regularly as people seeking constant improvement in their professional practice by wanting to “aim higher”. For Chad, regular reflection is an opportunity for constant self-development in an attempt to reach a "perfectionist" level that perhaps describes the highest level of professionalism:

> *I am a firm believer that those people, they aim for better or they aim for higher, they do reflections or what we call self-development. I think it's something related to being a perfectionist. (Chad)*

Sami also focused on the critical role that reflection can play in shaping the practice of corporate trainers, as he saw the need for corporate trainers to reflect at the end of each day. He described this process as equivalent to running through a "P&L" (a profit-and-loss analysis) for a company, in which one reviews where the company is doing well (where it is making profits) and where the losses are coming from. For Sami, each training day is an opportunity to improve as to him, there is no such thing as a perfect training day. Even "minor" incidents are opportunities for improvement. To illustrate this point further, Sami used the word "Kaizen", the Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices (Singh & Singh, 2009), to describe the benefits of regular reflection:

> *Reflecting on the day, at the end of each day is critical. So running a P&L every day, at night is crucial. Because there is no such thing as the perfect training day. There are always opportunities where you could have done better. Now, some of these opportunities are minor, but still, in terms of Kaizen, and in terms of continuous improvement, there is always room. (Sami)*

Fadi compared reflection to the act of "sharpening the saw", a term used by Covey (2013) in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. In this book, the seventh and final habit is "Sharpening the Saw", which is described as a process of constant self-renewal that allows a person to increase his or her capacity to produce and deal with life's challenges (Covey, 2013). Fadi also described this as a process of constantly "pushing yourself" in order to improve performance. This description is perhaps similar to what Chad mentioned about the pursuit of perfection through continuous improvement.

> *So I think, to sharpen the saw, and keep pushing yourself, is something you need to do now, whether you're doing it on a personal level, or a team level. You can reflect and say, "What can I do better next time?" (Fadi)*

Jamal added his view that rather than continuous development, he sees reflection as a tool for "continuous evolution". In using the word "evolution", Jamal conjured an image of constant change and adaptation with the goal of improvement.

> *Maybe I can call it [reflection] something like the continuous evolution of the trainer. (Jamal)*

Idris also agreed that reflection was a tool for continuous development and "growth". However, Idris went further with his description by adding the notion of "self" to the discussion. For Idris, self-development required a level of "self-awareness" that not everyone necessarily possesses. I will expand on this topic under the third theme ("On Becoming a Master Reflector").

> *I would say continuous self-development through self-awareness. To develop and grow as corporate trainers through reflection. (Idris)*

Finally, there was broad agreement among the participants that reflection is a continuous process. For Idris, reflection is a process that is "unending", as he equated reflection with learning about one's self. Similarly, Fadi stressed the importance of constant reflection as an "unending process":

> *So in a way, reflection, it's a non-ending process. Because learning about yourself is an unending process. (Idris)*

> *Reflection is very important. But I will say as a closing thought, that it is an endless process. (Fadi)*

While Chad agreed with Idris and Fadi that reflection needs to be a constant process, he went further by explaining the reasoning behind describing reflection as a "never-ending exercise". For Chad, reflection results in improvement, which ultimately benefits the person reflecting. As a result, this person "wants" to reflect more. Therefore, reflection has the potential to evolve into a virtuous cycle where reflection results in improvement, which motivates the person to reflect even more.

> *I think reflection is a never-ending exercise. And the more that you do it, the more that you want to do more of it. (Chad)*

In this sub-theme, I presented the views of the research participants regarding the long-term benefits of reflection. For participants, constant reflection can shape their practice by helping corporate trainers continuously improve their profession. In the next theme, I discuss the research participants' views regarding the temporal nature of reflection.

4.3 Theme 2: The Temporal Nature of Reflection

Based on my analysis of the interview data, participants' discussion of reflection appeared to fall into three distinct categories, each corresponding to a specific time frame: 1) reflection for the future, 2) reflection in the present, and 3) reflection on the past.

4.3.1 Reflection-Before-Action (For the Future)

Edwards (2017) and Postholm (2008) state that as an educator prepares for an event, they are reflecting *before-action* to ensure the success of that event. During the interviews, several research participants commented on the importance of preparation prior to the start of a training course. Interviewees felt that preparation is an integral part of the training event that should become a ritual. According to several interviewees, corporate trainers should begin visualising the training session and the possible reaction of the participants the night before the event to prevent the occurrence of any unpleasant surprises and increase the chance of a successful learning session. However, while most interviewees agreed on the need for preparation, regardless of the level of experience of the corporate trainer, one interviewee felt that the importance of preparation diminishes as the corporate trainer gains in experience.

The Big P

Sami stressed that preparation is a key component of delivering a successful training that no amount of charisma can replace. According to Sami, attempts by the trainer to cover up a lack of preparation by "schmoosing" the audience or using "charisma" to win over the participants will eventually fail. While these social skills can work for a short amount of time, the audience will eventually see through it. Sami described preparation as "the big P": an essential component of corporate training that is a critical part of delivering a successful training session.

> *If I have to choose one word, it's the big P: Preparation. You cannot schmoose an audience regardless of how glib you are, how charismatic you are. You can do that for half an hour, or an hour, or maybe a couple, but not for long periods. So, the best way is to be as prepared as possible. (Sami)*

Ritual Visualisation

Sami described this preparation as a mental "chess game" that starts the night before the training session. During this period of preparation, the trainer needs to anticipate the audience's moves (such as questions, objections, and reaction to environmental factors) and formulate appropriate responses:

> *Your training day starts the night before. Like a chess game. You try to visualise every possible move that the audience might throw at you and you prepare for that situation so that if, and when, it happens on the day of the training, your reactions are natural. (Sami)*

Younes also described visualising his different actions prior to the actual course. He described this process as a "ritual" that starts the "night before", in which he consciously thinks about what he should say and what he should do during the different phases of the training course.

> *Usually, the thinking starts the night before the training with me. The ritual that I do is that I prepare the slides a week before. The night before, I go over the slides and then I start thinking of what to say here and what to say in general. (Younes)*

Chad agreed that preparation plays a critical role in the success of his training courses, and noted that the real work in his training sessions happens prior to the actual event. By describing training as "90% preparation", it was as if he thought of preparation as the major requirement for a successful training session. For Chad, the process of preparation allows him to anticipate what might happen during the course and enables him to better react to different incidents.

> *Usually, there is a lot of preparation before we go to train. We always say when we do training, we say it's 90% preparation and 10% presentation. So it's similar. You need to prepare yourself. Preparation and planning should be there. Preparation is always good. Why? Because you cover all the areas. (Chad)*

Minimising Mistakes

Without this preparation, there is a chance that the training will not be successful. According to Sami, a failure to prepare will be noticed by participants and will reflect poorly on the corporate trainer. Sami described the lack of preparation as getting "caught with your pants down" which conjures an unprofessional image that suggest a shameful act that is unbecoming of a professional.

> *If you're not prepared, if you haven't done your dry runs the night before, either with a live audience or with a fictional audience, then you're going to be caught with your pants down. And audiences will see that. If they see an opening, a hesitation, they will go for the kill. (Sami)*

Preparation is a key process to reduce the probability of mistakes or mishaps during the training. Fadi noted that he focuses more on preventing mistakes than correcting them after the fact. This prevention can be done through a process of preparation that not only includes planning and arranging the content, but also involves other aspects such as finding more details about the participants and their backgrounds.

> *I stop to think and I say, "Why did this happen?" I'm in the quality field and we think about preventing rather than correcting. How can we prevent this in the future? So better planning, better communication with the client, asking for the profile of people before they come, their job description. If you can get that information that might help you to avoid and prevent that situation because it's not pleasant and it puts lots of pressure on the trainer. (Fadi)*

Plan B

In addition, proper preparation means thinking about the possibility of different scenarios happening and being prepared for such eventualities. For example, Fadi delivers courses in both Arabic and English. Sometimes, participants register for a course in English but are more comfortable communicating in Arabic. Therefore, he prepares a plan B that includes having copies of the content and exercises in the other language. From this preparation process, he creates a to-do list that is a play-by-play guide for the training course.

The other thing is to be prepared with plan B. So you might go on to this training in English or Arabic, and then you might already have a copy somewhere in the other language, even with some exercises. So if that happens, you can deal with it. And you have the backup plan as well. So you create a checklist and you basically go through it before each training and make sure that you know that if this happens, this is what you do on the training front. (Fadi)

While most interviewees who mentioned preparation during the interviews spoke about the importance of preparation regardless of experience, Adam made a different point. For him, the importance of preparation decreases as the instructor gains more experience. Adam agrees that preparation is critical, but mainly for new trainers. As the corporate trainer gains confidence and experience, he or she gains the ability to the deliver the training course without much preparation, or as Adam described it, the trainer develops the ability to "wing it":

I think if I'm a new trainer, I would focus on preparation. You have to really be comfortable and confident, and you really need to know exactly what to do. You probably have to do a dry run or something. But you really need to be in a position that you're very comfortable in and that comes with preparation. So you need to be well prepared with every course you are presenting, especially in the first year. For now, I'm in a position that I'll be able to, for lack of a better word, maybe wing it or probably try to get by as much as I can. But this does not work in the first year. (Adam)

4.3.2 Reflection-In-Action (For the Present)

Schön referred to reflection-in-action as a process whereby professionals need to think on their feet (Smith, 2001). For Jamal, the reflection-in-action process is in response to a perceived challenge while he is delivering a training course. This challenge causes him to pause and think about how he can overcome that particular challenge.

You know, when you're delivering training and you face a challenge, the first thing you have to think of is how can you overcome that particular challenge. (Jamal)

For Rami, when such a challenge occurs, he finds himself changing material "on the go". Rami described an incident in a recent course in which he felt that the course was not "helping" which probably meant that it was not delivering the original learning objectives. As a result, he changed the “flow” of the training material to make it more effective.

> *I have a course called […] and I recently changed the whole flow of material because I found that during the training, the current material was not helping me and I had to come up with exercises on the go. (Rami)*

Younes described something similar. During his training courses, Younes sometimes finds that he is losing his audience’s attention. As a result, he thinks about what he can do differently and changes his material and delivery style accordingly to “draw” the attention of his attendees and keep them engaged.

> *You always find something to really draw your audience’s attention, especially when you feel that you’re losing them. That’s through one way or another, because you cannot keep their attention for a long period of time. So sometimes you feel like you’re losing them. So automatically, you do something to really bring their attention back. (Younes)*

Younes compared reflection in-action to having his persona split into two, where one persona is delivering the training course while the other is watching and providing advice on what to do and what not to do. According to Younes, this ability is developed over time as a professional becomes more experienced in their craft:

> *It’s my schizophrenic self, where you have one mind thinking and the other one is giving the presentation. And that is like you have a mini-you on your shoulder. And then he’s watching the training and he’s giving tips and pieces of advice. But you know, at the beginning of your career and the training, you are not that experienced to be able to really think at the same time while you’re giving the training. (Younes)*

4.3.3 Reflection-After-Action (About the Past)

Reflection-after-action, which has also been described as reflection-on-action, refers to reflection that happens after the occurrence of the event on which it is focused (Rogers, 2001). Fadi described reflection-on-action as his “espresso or eureka moment”, wherein, after a training session, he sits down with a cup of coffee and thinks about what happened during the day. The purpose of this thinking is to lead to better outcomes in future sessions.

> *Well, it's having that espresso moment. After the training, in the afternoon, I call it my eureka moment or reflection moment. And I reflect and think about previous assignments in training if we're specifically talking about that. And then future training, how they can be better in terms of my sort of delivery, of my approach, lessons learned, I would call it. (Fadi)*

For Younes, reflection-on-action it is about the process of thinking about previous "mistakes" that happened during the session and what can be done to fix those mistakes.

> *You think about it after the training has finished. And then after whatever mistakes you have made in the training. (Younes)*

Similarly, Adam described reflection-on-action as looking back and determining what his participants liked and what they did not like in order to update his material and approach.

> *You reflect back: what did you do right, what did you do wrong, what are the things that they really liked, what are the things that they really didn't like and didn't have a lot of engagement. Probably I tried a certain technique and it didn't work out very well. So I go back, and I update whatever I've done. (Adam)*

Reflection-on-action provides new ideas and results in updates to training material, approach, or training delivery style. For Fadi, reflection-on-action is about putting together a checklist that can improve his future training sessions.

> *I think, I sit down, reflect, update my checklist, if you want to call it a checklist, think of how my next experiences will be easier. Whether it's logistics, or whether it's the audience, or whether maybe it's the client themselves. (Fadi)*

The process of reflection-on-action also provides an opportunity to come up with new ideas and results in a different way of doing things. Fadi commented that his reflection-on-action results in new case studies or exercises that he can use, which usually leads to positive feedback from his participants. For Fadi, the constant process of reflection makes him a better corporate trainer.

> *I notice that certain things I had to basically change, whether it's maybe the approach, maybe it is the delivery, maybe it is the material. So over the years I've been noticing that type of reflection,*

review, self-critique really helped a lot to basically improve delivery. (Fadi)

Ramsey described reflection-on-action as an opportunity for learning. For him, every session is an opportunity to learn. This allows him to change his delivery style and material to improve his training sessions.

I try as much as possible always to learn from every session that I take, whether in terms of delivering the training and how's it delivered, and how do I approach the objectives, the content and the exercises and the tools that I use, whether it's also on the examples that sometimes I use. We can tweak some of these and put them into our discussion. Yeah, so I like to always learn from what I do. (Ramsey)

4.4 Theme 3: On Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

In this section, which is divided into three sub-themes, I discuss the participants' views on becoming an effective reflective practitioner. The first sub-theme presents the views of the research participants regarding the characteristics of those who have mastered reflection, while the second sub-theme discusses the different levels of reflection. The third sub-theme outlines the tools that the research participants suggested to aid in the process of reflection.

4.4.1 Characteristics of a Master Reflector

Chad argued that certain "traits" and "capabilities" are required to be effective in reflection. These traits and capabilities include emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and the desire to continuously develop. Salovey and Mayer (1990) define emotional intelligence (EI) as the ability to recognise emotions, in oneself as well as in others, and to effectively manage these emotions with the ultimate goal of promoting personal growth.

In referring to emotional intelligence, Chad was perhaps commenting on the ability of certain trainers to accurately assess how participants are reacting to their teaching style or training material. People with a high emotional intelligence quotient are more sensitive to the state of mind of others and are therefore able to better react and adapt (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017). Chad also used the term "self-awareness" which is, according to Goleman and Boyatzis (2017), one of the main pillars of emotional intelligence. Self-awareness represents how accurately we are able to understand our own feelings and emotions (Morin, 2011). In addition to emotional intelligence and self-awareness, Chad argued that those who are successful at reflection must possess a desire to continuously develop themselves. Without this desire to improve, reflection might become a one-time event rather than a constant habit. This is also a characteristic of master reflectors on which I will expand later.

> *I think here there are lots of traits related to the capability of a person that reflects. One of them, in my personal point of view, could be how emotionally intelligent he is, if he has the self-awareness so he can really sit and see if he did some mistake, and if he wants to develop himself. So I think it depends on the personality and the traits of the person. (Chad)*

Fadi agreed with Chad that “being good” at reflection requires a certain level of emotional intelligence, while also mentioning the term “social intelligence”. Fadi was perhaps referring to social intelligence as tact or the ability to learn from previous successes or failures in social settings (Riggio, 2014). Similar to Chad, Fadi used the term self-awareness but also pointed to the ability of reflectors to “master” the skills of self-regulation to control and adjust their emotions as needed.

> *I think you’re going back to emotional intelligence and social intelligence, the two things that if you’re very good at, becomes part of the reflection that you are basically trying to do. And if you master these skills, whether it’s self-awareness or self-regulation, I think that will help a lot. (Fadi)*

Idris argued that self-awareness is a “pillar” of reflection and a priceless asset that we are naturally given as humans, but which needs to be continuously “cultivated”. Since self-awareness is an essential part of emotional intelligence, as mentioned earlier, those who want to “go back” and reflect need to increase their level of self-awareness. For Idris, it is clear that reflection and self-awareness go “hand in hand”, as a low level of self-awareness leads to shallow reflection and a shallow level of reflection means a low level of self-awareness.

> *There’s nothing more valuable in life than self-awareness. I think this is one aspect that we are naturally given. And it’s a matter of cultivating it more and more. And as you all know, self-awareness is*

> *the basic core competency in emotional intelligence. So without it, nothing in emotional intelligence can happen. So cultivating self-awareness and practicing it more and more is definitely important in order to go back and do the reflection. They go together hand in hand. So without a doubt, I think it's a pillar of reflection. (Idris)*

Idris continued by asking whether reflection can be affected by emotions, and answered his own question strongly in the affirmative. Idris stated that there is a clear negative correlation between emotions and reflection. This negative correlation means that emotions can negatively "impact" reflection by "tainting" the overall process of reflection, and therefore, "mastery" and "control" over emotions is critical for effective reflection.

> *So an interesting point on the impact or correlation of emotions with reflection. So maybe the question is: is reflection affected by emotions? If you're reflecting and you're basically tainted by your emotions, will your reflection be affected as a result? I think the answer is a solid yes. Not sure if many people can do that while heavily involved with emotions. So I think having mastery or control over these emotions during reflection is an important element that should be there. (Idris)*

Sami also claimed that self-awareness is a critical element for effective reflection. While discussing the reason why some corporate trainers do not reflect regularly even though the benefits are clear, Sami stated that just because a certain process has clear benefits does not necessarily mean that everyone will follow that process. As an example, he talked about meditation, arguing that while the benefits were clear for everyone to see, less than five percent of people practice meditation daily. Similarly, while the benefits of reflection are obvious, only a minority of people will practice it on a regular basis. As for the reason for "shying" away from reflection, Sami stated that practicing reflection is not easy, because it requires a certain level of self-awareness or "humility" that not everyone possesses.

> *Let me use this analogy. Self-reflection and meditation are closely associated. And I don't think there's a single adult in the world that would challenge the benefits of meditation. Meditation is known to improve your heart rate, reduce your stress, improve your physical and spiritual well-being, and improve your metabolism. Everyone knows that. Yet less than 5% of people do it. Despite all the literature that exists and some of this literature is scripture; it's holy. And still, people abstain and shy away from doing it because it's not easy. It*

requires a level of self-awareness and humility that many people just don't have. (Sami)

Sami claimed that highlighting the benefits of reflection was not enough to push people to become a master reflector. Sami argued that people already understand clearly that reflection is a beneficial process that leads to continual self-improvement. However, he indicated that he believes that the "fear" of what might be reflected in the "mirror" keeps people from making the "leap". His description suggested that Sami feels that there is a chasm between reflecting and not-reflecting, and people have to decide which side they want to be on. For Sami, crossing the chasm requires a certain level of "confidence" in order to successfully jump from one side to the other. This confidence is not necessarily a confidence in one's abilities, but rather a confidence that allows one to see one's mistakes reflected clearly without bruising one's "ego". Sami suggested that people do not reflect because they fear that reflection will expose their shortcomings and bruise an idealised image they hold of themselves:

So yes. You could highlight the benefits but people already know that looking at the mirror will help you see things better. Still, people don't look because they're afraid of making the leap. They're afraid of what they might see. They are not confident enough to accept the fact that their performance is below standard. There is an ego element there. So, you could encourage people to see the benefits of self-reflection. But don't hold your breath. You won't have too many takers. (Sami)

Rami also highlighted the issue of "ego" by arguing that some people might be unable to overcome their own sense of self-worth to be able to learn from experience. Rami suggested this might be especially likely of people with extensive experience, as someone who has spent a long period of time in a certain sector might think that they have already "paid their dues", meaning perhaps that they already spent time learning all that needs to be learnt and that there is therefore no real value in reflecting. For these people, Rami felt that they were unable to learn from experience, as their ego would make them place the blame on others when something goes wrong.

Well, the first thing that came to my mind is that any person with a big ego wouldn't undergo such a process. Maybe some would but if

> *not someone who has been for a long while in that area. Maybe they would say, "I paid my dues". When you believe that, when something goes wrong, it's nothing to do with you. Then you will learn nothing of this experience. (Rami)*

Ego, or lack thereof, was also referred to by Ramsey as he mentioned the need for "humbleness". This humbleness allows an individual to overcome self-ego and realise that others might know more. Therefore, to be able to learn from experience, an individual must know that while they might be in the position of a trainer, they are also a student who can learn about new technical content, better styles of training delivery, or more effective ways of developing presentations.

> *In one of my courses, there was a definition of benchmarking. And I was humble enough to know that somebody else is doing it better. You're the teacher, the instructor, the trainer, but you're still also a student learning content, delivery, and presentation. (Ramsey)*

Jamal seemed to agree, stating that reflection starts from "within". Individuals who reflect have the "will" to grow and develop. For Jamal, this willingness is a "golden key" that opens the door to greater possibilities. Without this "will" to reflect, the door to future development could remain closed.

> *For those individuals, I think, first of all, they have to be willing to evolve their current training abilities. So I think it starts with the will. It comes from within. Maybe that could be referred to as the golden key that everyone has to find within themselves. (Jamal)*

Finally, Idris and Jamal argued that a master reflector is someone who can make reflection a continuous habit. Idris felt that someone who is effective at reflection will never "claim" mastery of reflection, as he or she probably realises that reflection can never be mastered as it can always go "deeper and deeper". When mentioning depth, Idris was perhaps indicating that there are different levels of reflection that can unravel as we spend more time on the process. For Idris, a master reflector is someone who realises that there is always an opportunity to reflect more deeply in order to become more "effective". Therefore, reflection is a never-ending process that should become a "habit".

> *I think a master reflector will never claim himself to be a master reflector because the more reflecting you do, the more you realise how much more effective you can be. So it just goes deeper and*

> *deeper. So I guess I would define a master reflector as the reflector who knows every time he or she reflects, how much more reflection they need to do. So the question for the reflector is, has it become a habit for you? (Idris)*

Chad agreed with Idris, stating that the reflection process becomes a form of natural "behaviour" that eventually morphs into a "habit". This habit of reflection results in benefits on a personal level.

> *Yes. I wanted to say it has become something that you need to do and then it becomes a behaviour and that behaviour changes to a habit and that habit is bringing you results on a personal perspective. (Chad)*

Finally, Idris mentioned that a master reflector is someone who is willing to go beyond typical reflection and delve into areas that are "uncomfortable". These could be areas that stir negative emotions or do not necessarily conform with one's own self notions.

> *Another question that you might want to ask yourself: are you willing to reflect on areas you're uncomfortable with? (Idris)*

4.4.2 Levels of Reflection

Research participants referred to reflection as a phenomenon comprising various layers, similar to the layers of an onion. Idris described three levels of reflection. The outer layer, which he referred to as the surface level is the beginning point of reflection that starts with some basic questions regarding what was said and done.

> *You start first of all with the surface reflection by asking: "What did I say? What did I do?" (Idris)*

The second layer, according to Idris, is where one digs "deeper" by trying to understand the "triggers" that prompted one to respond in a certain way or to act in a particular fashion.

> *And then you can take it deeper to understand what triggered me to say what I said and do what I did. (Idris)*

Then there is a third layer, where the reflector tries to understand more about his or her identity by questioning what he or she knows and what is "behind" the trigger. It seems that Idris was trying to convey that, by really understanding oneself, one can start to understand the triggers that cause one to say certain things or act in various ways.

> *And then you can take it to a third level where you start to understand your identity, what you know, and how you define your own identity because that this is what's behind the triggers. (Idris)*

For Idris, the first layer, or the surface layer, is a superficial level that does not reveal enough. He indicated that the process of reflection needs to take us deeper until we understand our personal "programming". It was as if Idris compared humans to computer programs that have if–then statements. If x happens, which to Idris is a trigger, then y should result, which to Idris is the action. However, Idris cautioned that we needed to go further and attempt to develop a better understanding of our identities to escape this automatic programming.

> *So yes, you start with the superficial level, if that makes any sense, which is the actions and rewards, and then you go to the trigger. So you understand the programming and then you go a step further to that identity level. So I would say, yes, three levels. (Idris)*

Rather than levels, Chad described four different phases of reflection as if he were moving from one point to another. The first phase begins with putting oneself in a certain state of mind, or even in a certain physical place such as a room, where one is prepared for the process of reflection.

> *So, usually, I have three or four phases. The first phase is to put yourself in the situation of reflection. So the first action is to put yourself in the reflection moment, to put yourself in a certain physical place or mental state. (Chad)*

For Chad, the second phase is devoid of any real "analysis" as it is a surface level phase that "recaptures" what occurred without delving too much into the reasons.

> *The second will be to recapture what happened without any, maybe analysis, and think and ask: what happened really? (Chad)*

The third and fourth phases are where Chad asks himself about lessons learnt and tries to think of how actions should change for the future in order to improve and do better.

> *Third, what is the lesson learned of what happened? And the fourth phase will be, how can I do it better? (Chad)*

Chad then thought about these phases and summarised them into three, in which the first phase of placing himself in a state of mind where he can reflect is perhaps phase zero or a prelude to the main three phases. Phase one is a “surface” level phase in which actions are merely recorded and viewed “as is”. The second phase is the questioning of what went wrong or what went right. The third, and final phase, is where there is a thought process of if and how the actions can be done differently to achieve a better outcome. Chad called this third and last phase a “critical analysis” phase, in which the thought process is much more detailed.

> *So the first one is recording the action as is. Then the second one is what went wrong or what went right? And then how can it be better. So this is how I see it as simple as it is. We can name it say surface, then learning from what happened, then the critical analysis of the action. (Chad)*

Fadi, however, questioned the linear arrangement of levels or phases implied by such descriptions. Instead, he argued that reflection is not a “structured” approach whereby one goes neatly from point A to point B. Rather, Fadi seemed to think of the process of reflection and someone constantly jumping between different levels.

> *But would you do them without noticing? I mean, you’re not segregating them, right? You’re, in your mind, doing these levels, but you’re not going through phases. It’s not like a structured approach. You are not just moving from one level to another. (Fadi)*

In response to Fadi, Idris agreed that the process of reflection was not structured, as a person reflecting goes “back and forth” analysing different levels. This, Idris stated, reminded him of a mind-map, which is a tool that can be used to capture random thoughts and eventually organise them into a structure. Therefore, while our thinking is non-linear, Idris claimed that with deeper analysis, random thoughts can be eventually structured and organised.

> *Yes. We go back and forth between the three levels. And then we analyse and analyse and realise, ah okay, so this is at an identity level, this is at a trigger level, this is just at the surface level. So when you said what you said, you reminded me of a mind map and the whole concept behind the mind map. Because our thinking is not*

> *linear. It's multi-directional, right? So you're right, when you first do it, I think yes, it goes into many different directions. But the more you reflect on something, the more you can structure it. (Idris)*

4.4.3 Tools to Aid Reflection

Participants listed several tools to aid in the practice of reflection. These aids included setting a regular time and place for reflection ("espresso moments"), seeking feedback from others, reflective writing, and group reflection.

Espresso Moments

Fadi argued that setting aside a time and place for reflection is an important part of the process. Fadi called reflection his "espresso" moment. This moment is where he sits alone with his thoughts, with a cup of coffee in hand, and contemplates. He also called this his "eureka" moment, possibly referring to the outcome of this process. For Fadi, this is the moment where a light bulb goes off and he learns something new.

> *I think it becomes very important to try to allocate the time and set up the environment for that exercise. It's having that espresso moment. After the training, in the afternoon, I call it my eureka moment or reflection moment. (Fadi)*

For Sami, a cigar serves the same purpose. Sami also had an allocated space and time for reflection on the "events of the day". However, this "cigar" time is used not only to look backwards, but also to reflect forwards on what type of stories or exercises would be more effective in achieving the learning outcomes of his training course.

> *It's my cigar moment. Me, a cigar, and the events of the day. But it's also the time to start preparing for what happens tomorrow, while also taking into account what has happened so far. Which stories should I tell? Which analogies will be more effective? Which exercises will deliver the message? (Sami)*

Similarly, Chad had a set time on Wednesdays after the end of the training day. During his "five o'clock" weekly reflection session, he would think about the events of the past few training days. For Chad, the reason for scheduling a regular time is "results", as it seems that his "habit" of reflection has proven successful, and he has therefore turned it into a “structure”. This structure probably is a certain organised process that Chad has come to depend on to “get things done”.

> *At the end of the week, on Wednesday at five o’clock, I’ll reflect on the previous days. And why I’m doing so? Because it’s getting me results. So in a structured way, it’s becoming a habit and it gets things done. (Chad)*

Sami went further and argued that reflection needs to be a daily exercise that is done on a “regular basis”. According to Sami, reflecting every day allows one to recreate events accurately, as these events are still “fresh in your mind”. It seems that for Sami, a critical component of reflection is an accurate reconstruction of events, with such accuracy being “erased” with the passage of time.

> *If you’re doing it on a daily basis, memory is not an issue. Because it’s still there fresh in your mind. If you wait a couple of days, then what happened on Sunday gets erased by the time it’s Wednesday. So you have to do it on a regular basis. (Sami)*

Fadi made a similar comment and agreed that setting aside a daily time for his “espresso” moment makes reflection more effective. This moment is “planned” as he sets aside a daily time and place for individual reflection. This aids in recalling events as they stay “fresh in your memory”:

> *I mean, the espresso moment is happening every day, right? I think it will be fresh in your memory. So you come back and think about new things to change or to bring into the training. The espresso moment is planned. (Fadi)*

Feedback

Other than setting aside a time and place for regular reflection, participants discussed the impact of training, coaching, mentorship, and feedback. Chad stated that emotional intelligence and self-awareness, which are essential components for effective reflection, can be “developed”, allowing an individual to “progress” in these areas. According to Chad, this development can be done through training, through talking to other people and soliciting feedback about self-performance, through mentors who can help one see one’s own strengths and weaknesses, and through executive coaching. Chad emphasised coaching probably because coaches can work with a person on an individual level and provide a level of personal feedback that is more effective.

> *As a human resources specialist, I know that emotional intelligence is one of those leadership competencies and for sure, it can be developed. So self-awareness can be developed to reach to a level to progress. And one of the things that can be done is through training, through talking to people, through mentorship programmes, and especially, through coaching. (Chad)*

Idris agreed with Chad on the ability of an executive coach to help people develop their self-awareness. Idris claimed that a coach who is willing to "listen" provides a person with an incentive to discuss their emotions, which in turn provides more clarity and helps build self-awareness. Listening is followed by understanding, which allows the coach to "indirectly guide" the person towards a clearer perception of what happened.

> *While talking to a coach, I can find my own awareness by being with that person who will listen to me and then who will guide me in an indirect way to take action towards the things that went wrong or the things that went right. (Idris)*

Rather than a coach, Jamal discussed how mentorship can aid in the process of reflection. Jamal felt that a "mentorship programme" is an effective approach since mentors, similar to coaches, can build individual relationships with their mentees and can provide them with more personalised feedback. This personalised feedback for the mentee is based on the mentor having the ability to "see them in action". When mentors see mentees in action, they are able to form their own judgement based on their expertise. As mentors provide their perspective, mentees can develop their self-awareness and understand how they are perceived by others.

> *I think the most effective way is to have a mentorship programme, or a coupling with someone who can work individually with that person. That person would show this new corporate trainer how it is done and provide feedback to the new corporate trainer when they see them in action. (Jamal)*

Younes made a similar point by mentioning that mentors can give relevant feedback about the "how" of delivery by observing how trainers stand, how they use hand gestures, how they project their voice, and even how they breathe. This needs direct observation as the mentor “has to see you in performance”. After this observation, the mentor can give the corporate trainer “tips” and “advice” that can improve future training sessions.

> *The way you stand up, the way you use your hand gestures, the way you use your voice, to project it so that the people sitting in the back side of the room can really hear you, the way to breathe; things that have to do with the ‘how-to present’ more than the ‘what-to present’. And then he would give you kind of the approval on it. However, for the ‘how-to’, definitely he has to see you in performance and then give you the tips and pieces of advice. (Younes)*

With regards to getting advice about one’s performance, Sami suggested that this can come not only from a coach or mentor, but also from training participants. However, Sami seemed to suggest that not everyone can provide helpful feedback. Rather, there are “certain” members of the audience that one must carefully select and solicit feedback by “pouncing” on them. “Pouncing” is usually a term used in reference to a predator swooping on its prey, and Sami probably meant something similar. Sami saw himself as someone who, like the predator, is hungry for “feedback”. The prey, in this case, is the participant who has that feedback but probably needs to be persuaded to part with it. Sami went on to explain that in the Middle East, the culture is “non-confrontational” and therefore, participants will most likely be “cordial” and just give positive feedback in order to avoid any “confrontation”. Thus, Sami argued that obtaining “candid” feedback that helps one improve requires a willingness to “probe” and cajole participants into providing their real opinion. To Sami, this is the only way to improve.

> *Another very useful technique is to pounce on certain members in the audience and seek their feedback. Not formally, like we do at the end of the programme, but informally. It’s not easy because in the Middle East, confronting others, is not something that people are comfortable with. So when you ask someone about the session, they’re likely to be cordial and courteous and tell you: “Oh, it was great”. So you have to be a bit more curious and nosy and probing. And, you know, push people to give the right level of candid feedback that will help you improve. (Sami)*

Idris also mentioned feedback as a way to “collect information” from a “different angle”. For Idris, reflection is a process that is highly dependent on the “availability of data”. If a person wants to reflect on an event and only uses her own view of what happened as input, then she is missing vital information that could result in faulty output. Idris indicated that feedback from others are “observations” that can add to one’s repertoire of information as it is difficult for one person to see everything, no matter how “intelligent” or perceptive they are. For Idris, it is a given that two people witnessing a similar event are better equipped to “grasp” what has really happened, as “two heads are better than one”. In using the word “grasp”, Idris was perhaps referring to the fact that witnessing an event is one thing, but “grasping” or understanding what happened goes deeper than just viewing the surface.

> *We try to engage others about feedback for us to collect information from different angles. At the end of the day, reflection is something we do based on all the data that is available to us, whether we got it through our own observations or through the observations of others. But you know, the saying goes, two heads are better than one. No matter how intelligent we are, we cannot grasp every single angle of everything. (Idris)*

Writing

In addition to feedback, writing was mentioned as an aid to the process of reflection. Idris described writing as a “remarkable” tool that allows the “brain to slow down” and think of problems from different perspectives. Writing, according to Idris, allows the person experiencing negative emotions to “get them out”. He also mentioned that documenting issues allows a person to come back to them at a later time and revisit the incident. For Idris, it seems that there is a temporal component that affects how a person views a certain incident, as he commented on how the passage of time can help one calm down and realise how an initial interpretation may have been “crazy”, perhaps due to the emotions of the moment.

> *Writing is definitely valuable, particularly when you’re in a bad mood or experiencing negative emotions that are heavy and you want to get them out. So the most interesting thing in the world is to write and then read what you wrote. That’s another way of finding how crazy you are. It is amazing, because it forces your brain to slow down and articulate what you’re going through thought-wise, emotion-wise, and then reading it back to yourself with a compassionate eye. It’s remarkable. (Idris)*

While Idris thought of writing as a remarkable tool, none of the eight other research participants used writing as a tool to enhance the process of reflective thinking, even though some of them acknowledged the positive impact of writing. For example, Ramsey referred to a colleague, Abu Shaker, who diligently writes about his experiences and “what he learned” after the end of each training course. The “lessons learnt” come from both the training course itself, as well as the participants. This process seems helpful to Ramsey as it includes not just ideas about what happened, but also actions that can be taken in the future to improve other training courses. In this context, Ramsey used the word “transfer”, which is a purposeful act of physically taking the key learnings from one event and transposing them to another training event in the future.

> *Some people I know do it. Abu Shaker has his book where he writes at the end of each programme what he learned from the session and from the participants. I think it is helpful to make sure that he can really transfer not only just an idea, but what he should have done. (Ramsey)*

Jamal mentioned the process of reflective writing as a tool that is used by children in school as part of a “learning journey” and a “technique” used for growth. Jamal proposed that, since reflective writing is a tool used in other professional domains such as nursing and education, this particular “technique” could have merits within corporate training. While Jamal seemed to support the idea of writing as a tool to aid reflection, he seemed unsure of its practicality. By stating that “I don’t see why it wouldn’t have merits”, Jamal, while supportive, appeared to be somewhat unsure of its effectiveness.

> *Reflective writing is a technique that is used by kids as they go through schools. Often, reflective writing is part of their learning journey. So with this in mind, I believe the technique has its merits. And since it is applied across other industries, I don’t see why it wouldn’t have merits for corporate trainers. (Jamal)*

Jamal went on to mention that writing about experiences is one way to combat the loss of knowledge that occurs when experienced trainers retire. These trainers, who have “years” of experience, “take” their “knowledge” with them. It seemed as if Jamal was referring to knowledge as a valuable commodity that can sometimes be lost. Through writing, Jamal saw a possibility of preserving “tacit” knowledge for current and future generations of trainers.

> *Trainers have been doing this for 15, 20, 25, 30 years. Often, they retire and they take their knowledge with them. I think this process of reflective writing allows organisations to capture this tacit knowledge and share it with future trainers and even existing trainers. (Jamal)*

Rami, however, disagreed with the value of writing. To him, reflective writing was of little value, as he just “knew” what happened. Rami felt that reflective writing could become an “obligation” and that anything documented would be perfunctory. However, Rami felt that the “questions” used as prompts in reflective writing would be worthwhile as a preparation for a verbal discussion. He also indicated that it would be “too rigid”, and thus difficult for him to adhere to. He characterised a policy that mandated written reflection as an “unhealthy” and “bureaucratic” process that would not succeed.

> *By the end of the week, I’m very tired. I feel it’s too obliging to sit down and write. I would say no. It wouldn’t add much value to write it down. Because I know. But maybe the questions that are within the process could be very enlightening. (Rami)*

Chad went even further and warned that any requirement for reflective writing will engender strong resistance, as most corporate trainers will not see reflective writing as an “added value”. Rather, if reflective writing were to be introduced as a requirement, most corporate trainers would have the “typical” reaction of resisting change and will “fight it”.

> *There will be a group who will fight this idea. They will say, “What is new? We don’t really need this, this is not adding value, this is wasting time, this is not generating money”. It will be the typical reaction when introducing something new. (Chad)*

Using Whatever Works

Finally, both Idris and Sami stated that since people are different, there is no one tool that works best and that individuals should seek their own aids. In this context, Idris mentioned Sami as an example, and described him as a “dashboard man” who is obsessed with outputs and results. Therefore, Sami would keep on “changing” his actions until he saw an improvement. This, Idris commented, worked for Sami. For others, perhaps there are different tools that would be better suited to their own temperament and personality. Therefore, Idris suggested that each individual should “choose” a mechanism that provides the most effective “support”.

> *I’ll just mention one individual, Sami, who is a dashboard man even when he does his own reflection. I’ve heard him talk about how he improved himself. What works for him is dashboards, outputs, and results. And he goes back and analyses, right? And it works for him. So I go back one more time. It’s about choosing the tool that supports you in the process all the way. (Idris)*

Similarly, Sami suggested that each person should find their own “tactics”. Sami mentioned that some of the people he coached took his feedback and then selected their own method of improving. Some chose to go back into academia and get another degree, while others felt that they needed more train-the-trainer courses. Some corporate trainers improved by recording themselves in action, while others invited colleagues, peers, and family to attend courses with them and then provide them with feedback. For Sami, reflection aids were a personal choice and individuals were obligated to find the “mechanism” that suited them best.

> *I put on my coaching hat and I helped people, but there were people who took the feedback and then found their own tactics. Some people went to academic institutions to improve the way they train. Some people started videotaping themselves. Some people invited colleagues and peers to come and attend. Some people invited family members to come and attend. So people found the mechanism they needed to improve. (Sami)*

4.5 Summary

A key finding that emerged from this research centred on research participants’ understanding of reflection. All research participants conceptualised reflection as a critical tool for continuous individual development. For Chad, regular reflection is an opportunity for constant self-development that can help in reaching a “perfectionist” level. Sami used the word “Kaizen”, the Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices (Singh & Singh, 2009), to describe reflection; while Fadi compared reflection to the act of “sharpening the saw”, a term used by Covey (2013) to describe the process of constant self-renewal.

In addition, participants agreed that reflection is a never-ending process. For Idris, reflection is "unending", as he equated reflection with learning about one's self. Similarly, Fadi stressed the importance of constant reflection as an "unending process". For Chad, reflection results in improvement, which ultimately benefits the person reflecting. As a result, reflection can evolve into a virtuous cycle in which reflection results in improvement, which motivates the person to reflect even more.

Another key finding was *how* research participants operationalised reflection within their professional practice. Reflection was triggered by a realisation that something was just not right. Idris stated that a negative emotion such as "pain" triggered his reflection, while Jamal described the realisation that a "problem…needs to be solved" as the beginning of the process. The next step is a "reconstruction of reality" as the reflector understood it. Chad described this as "reinventing moments" by looking at a "reflection of reality". The next step is an inner dialogue, which Adam described as a self-questioning phase. The process then continues with a modelling exercise that takes into consideration various future actions. Rami's reflection included thinking about alternative course of actions and "checking" if this would have been possible. The final two steps involve the development of a plan of action, followed by testing that action and getting feedback about whether the change had a positive impact.

A third key finding from this chapter pertains to the temporal aspect of reflection. Research participants not only viewed reflection as a tool to look back on the past or to deal with present challenges, but additionally, they viewed reflection as a way to prepare for the future. Preparation was described as the "Big P" that is necessary to prevent the occurrence of any unpleasant surprises and increase the chance of a successful training session.

The fourth key finding that emerged from this chapter was the participants' views on becoming an effective reflective practitioner. Participants claimed that an effective reflector must have certain traits, such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and the desire to continuously develop through a habitual process of reflection. Research participants felt that there were several tools or actions that can aid in the process of reflection, such as the scheduling of a certain time and place for reflection, collecting information from different angles through coaching, mentorship, and soliciting feedback from others.

4.6 Discussion

All research participants were strongly in agreement that reflection is critical for continuous individual development and that it is used as a tool to learn from experience, improve their individual skills, and deal with professional challenges. This finding is in broad agreement with the majority of literature that considers reflection a powerful tool for professional development (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987) and a “key element in learning from experience” (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 100). Reflection is how professionals acquire new knowledge and gain new insights that can be used for practice change (Schön, 1983).

Research participants also attached a temporal component to reflection, as they viewed it not only as a tool to look back on the past or to deal with present challenges, but additionally viewed reflection as a way to prepare for the future. Reflection on the past and on the present is a concept that Schön (1983, 1987) alluded to when he used reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action to describe reflection on the present and past (Finlay, 2008). In addition, several scholars have identified reflection for the future as an important component (Edwards, 2017; Eraut, 1995; Greenwood, 1993).

Findings from this research also show that the process of engaging in reflection, as portrayed by the research participants, fits the Vygotskian model of reflection. According to Shepel (1999), the Vygotskian process of reflection is a journey that begins in the real plane, with a person performing a practical action, and then realising there is a deficiency or developmental gap. The person then stops to reflect and transitions to the ideal plane and takes into consideration different future actions.

A finding from the analysis of reflection through a Vygotskian lens is the tendency of participants to rely on self-dialogue as the main mediational means. While self-questioning can be an effective tool for reflection (Teekman, 2000), self-dialogue alone cannot replace the richness of information added by the use of other mediational means (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019). To address this gap, Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019) found that educators who were instructed on the proper use of various mediational tools reported a significant improvement in the reflection process.

In the next chapter, I discuss additional findings from my research and categorise them into two themes. Theme four presents the participants' views on the need for building communities of practice in corporate training, and theme five discusses the professional identity of corporate trainers.

5 Findings - Part Two

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the views of the research participants through three themes that related mainly to the topic of reflection. In this chapter, which is the second part of the findings, my themes are devoted to the topic of corporate trainers themselves. During the semi-structured interviews and focus group, corporate trainers spoke about the challenges they face, the skills needed to be an effective trainer, and how the profession of corporate training can improve. The findings are presented through theme four: The professional identity of corporate trainers and theme five: Building communities of practice. Both themes, along with their sub-themes, are illustrated in Figure 14 below.

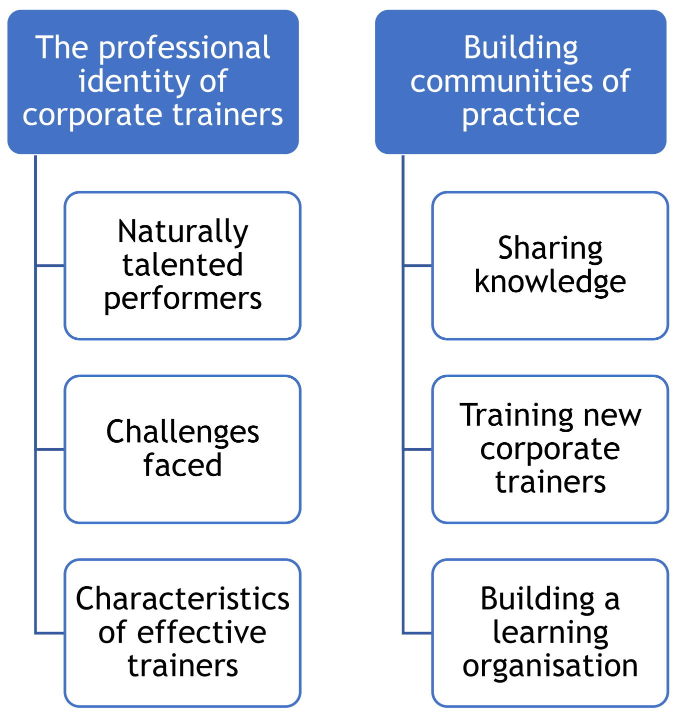


Figure 14. Themes and sub-themes part 2.

5.2 Theme 4: The Professional Identity of Corporate Trainers

In this section, I discuss the fourth theme, which focuses on the professional identity of corporate trainers. I have divided this theme into three sub-themes. The first sub-theme discusses how the research participants view their professional role as naturally talented performers. The second sub-theme describes the challenges that the research participants face in their careers. The third sub-theme summarises the characteristics of effective corporate trainers.

5.2.1 Naturally Talented Performers

In this sub-theme, I discuss how research participants constructed their professional identities as not only professionals who have a responsibility to educate, but also as talented entertainers who are consumer-minded educators. For the majority of research participants, corporate training was something they just happened to stumble on as others saw a certain talent in them. This talent was not only the ability to teach others, but also the ability to make training courses enjoyable.

Stumbling into Corporate Training

Seven of the nine research participants indicated that they never envisioned themselves as corporate trainers and simply "stumbled" into their current career by chance. For example, Sami began his career at one of the largest international food and beverages companies, where he was an operations manager responsible for setting up new restaurants. While he was attending a training programme, he was asked if he would be willing to deliver one of the sessions even though he did not have any background in conducting training workshops. After he delivered the session successfully, one of the training instructors approached him and asked if we would consider joining the training department, as he clearly seemed to be "enjoying" himself. Sami eventually applied for the position and became a trainer even though he had "absolutely no inkling" of what corporate training entailed. However, Sami appears to have naturally exceled in this sector, perhaps because of an innate talent that the other training instructors saw in him.

> *I was myself attending a training programme. During the programme, I was asked to conduct a small training session. So I prepared for a couple of days and I got up and conducted the session. It didn't take the instructors too long to take me to the side and say: "Listen. You seem to be enjoying this. If you're interested, we'd like to talk to you further". Before that, I had absolutely no inkling what training entailed. (Sami)*

Chad, who studied law, is another example of someone who ended up in corporate training purely by chance. While working at a law firm, Chad was asked to handle human resource (HR) matters and was given the responsibility for working with outside vendors on training internal staff. After a training session, the instructor asked Chad if he could refer any “engaged” and “motivated” instructors. This chance encounter seemed to stir something “dormant” in Chad. It was as if Chad knew subconsciously that corporate training was something he would enjoy and would excel at. After this chance encounter, he reached out to the training instructor and was offered a position within a week.

> *At the law firm, I was handling HR and I was nominating people to attend training sessions. One of the training instructors said, “We’re looking for people who are engaged and motivated, in case you happen to know someone”. After he left, I sent him an email telling him, “You’ve awoken something like a dormant matter in me”. After a week, I met the chairman and here I am. (Chad)*

Ramsey also ended up in corporate training by chance. A friend sent him a posting for a financial controller position, but by the time Ramsey applied, it had already been filled. However, his friend told him that the company was also looking for a corporate trainer who could deliver finance related courses. While this was not something that Ramsey had done before, the idea of becoming an instructor appealed to him.

> *I sent Ahmed my resume and he says, “Too late. They already hired another person. But they need a finance trainer”. I said, “What do you mean by finance trainer?” I thought about it and I kind of liked the idea of having to do training. I had an interview over the phone and they brought me to work as a finance trainer. (Ramsey)*

Similarly, Rami joked that he only ended up in corporate training by “God’s will”. While Rami was completing his master’s degree in chemistry, he worked part time for a non-governmental organisation (NGO). This NGO felt strongly about training its members in soft skills such as communication and negotiation. Rami was “fascinated” by the training session and by the trainer himself. Similar to Chad, something was stirred in him as he felt a profound change in his attitudes and abilities. Perhaps it was this positive change that he experienced in himself that motivated Rami to pursue a career in corporate training, as he felt that he could do the same for others.

> *[I became a trainer] by God’s will (laughing). I was part of an NGO in Lebanon that had a team dedicated to train members on mainly soft*

> *skills. I was fascinated by the trainer himself and I said to myself, "This is my job. This is what I like to do". But on top of that, I really experienced a change of self during this session in terms of my attitudes and my abilities. (Rami)*

Innate Talent Identified by Others

Even though the majority of the research participants ended up in corporate training by chance, five participants also mentioned that they believed that they possessed an innate talent for training that others were able to identify in them. Sami described how a training instructor told him that he delivered training like an expert who had been doing this for years, even though it was his first training workshop. Sami described this as "raw talent" that his company was able to see in him.

> *The instructor told me that "You seem to be enjoying this, like someone who's been doing it for years". So whether that was innate, whether it was my preparation, whether it was a mixture, I'm not sure. Once the company identified raw talent, they rushed me through a TTT [Train the Trainer] programme. (Sami)*

Idris also mentioned that his first company saw "something" in him that caused them to offer him a job as a training manager. While Idris did not mention what this "something" was, he commented that as he was reading the job description, he "fell in love with it". The "something" that his employer saw in him was probably a passion for training that somehow came across.

> *My very first employer saw something in me and they figured maybe this guy can do the job that we have for him. And the job was called training manager. So I read about the job and fell in love with it. (Idris)*

Similarly, Chad applied for a legal position in a multinational company in Lebanon. However, rather than offering him a job as a lawyer, the company identified a certain "something" in him that included being able to relate and communicate with people. As a result, he was offered a position in human resources, which he described as "ironic", perhaps since the job of a human resource manager is very different than the job of a lawyer. Chad seemed "surprised" that others saw in him a certain talent of which he was perhaps unaware.

> *My background is in law and I was on the board of the lawyer's association. I submitted my resume to a multinational company where they gave me a position, ironically, in human resources. And they said, "You have something. You can relate to people. You have good communication skills". They saw that during the interview and I was surprised. (Chad)*

Performers in the Spotlight

Sami compared corporate trainers to "performers" who are on a "stage" performing for an audience and catering to their specific needs. Sami described this by saying that if the audience demanded a certain song, then one needed to play that song, even if it was not originally "on the menu". In making this analogy, Sami was perhaps referring to the need to adapt his training material to satisfy the training participants by giving them certain activities or exercises that met their expectations. Sami explained this by saying that corporate trainers should be "there for the audience". This does not necessarily mean that corporate trainers should cater to the whims of the audience, but rather, they are there to ensure that the participants benefit from the training session.

> *You're like a performer who is on stage. And if the audience is yelling for a repeat, you do a repeat, even if you're running over time, even if you're tired. And if the audience wants you to play a certain song, and it's not on the agenda, or it's not on the menu, you play the song. Because you're there for the audience. (Sami)*

Idris also referred to corporate trainers as performers by mentioning that trainers are in the "spotlight" similar to a performer on stage. Being in the spotlight means that the focus of the audience is on the trainer, who is not only viewed as an "expert", but is also expected to share with them life experiences through storytelling.

> *When you're standing on the platform and delivering training programmes, you are viewed by the trainees as a subject matter expert, and it puts the spotlight on you to have answers. But surprisingly, the majority of the questions I used to get were about my life experience. (Idris)*

Adam characterised storytelling as being like "caffeine": it recaptures the attention of the audience and wakes them up, just like a cup of coffee can do when someone is feeling tired. Adam also enthused about the power of storytelling to explain complicated technical concepts.

> *Stories can be as good as caffeine for them. They love it. And you'll get their attention back. (Adam)*

Storytelling is also an important tool for Jamal, who stated that stories not only engage the audience, but also help in establishing "rapport" between the instructor and the participants. Through sharing personal stories, the instructor provides a more immersive learning experience, since stories can help connect the participants with a certain topic. In addition, Jamal stressed that, similar to performers on stage, corporate trainers need to work on their body language since they are in the spotlight.

> *They also need to work on things related to storytelling which really engages the audience and builds rapport with the audience. They need to work on things related to their body language and movement during a live face to face session. (Jamal)*

5.2.2 Challenges Faced

In this sub-theme, I discuss the challenges faced by research participants, including the lack of training at the beginning of their career, participants who are not always interested in attending training courses, language barriers, the difficulty in operating in a multi-cultural setting, and the struggle to keep up to date with the latest knowledge in their specific sector.

Inadequate Pre-service Training

While three participants went through formal Train the Trainer (TTT) programmes, six of the nine interviewees felt that they received little to no support at the beginning of their corporate training careers and were left to fend for themselves. For example, Ramsey was emphatic when he answered that he received no support "whatsoever" when he first started corporate training. As a result, his only source was reading books on how to deliver training sessions and how the corporate training industry worked.

> *Not whatsoever. They told me how to prepare for a presentation or for training a mini session. So I had to go for two weeks to read books*

> *on that to know about this industry. So that was the beginning and then basically just* يالله *(in Arabic: Let's go). (Ramsey)*

Ramsey then compared this experience to the trauma of learning how to swim. In his first swimming lesson, the coach demonstrated how to do the stroke and how to use his legs for keeping afloat. He then took him to the deep end of the pool and asked him to dive in. Ramsey screamed but the coach just "pushed" him in. Ramsey was just "thrown into the deep end" and expected to learn how to float. He felt the same way when he started corporate training, he recounted while laughing.

> *It kind of reminded me when I did my swimming session for the first time ever. In the first session, the coach showed me how to do the stroke and then said, "Let's go to the deep water". Like, "Ahhhhhhh!" Then he pushed me. And that's when I learned how to swim (laughing). I feel a lot of times very similar in training (laughing). (Ramsey)*

The lack of pre-training at the beginning of his career seemed still to bother Adam, even after 12 years of corporate training experience. When he first started, he attended a few training sessions with other instructors to observe them in action. He was then left to "explore his own destiny" by being asked to start delivering courses on project management. He described this as a "difficult" experience that "stressed" him out and caused him "anxiety" in the beginning of his corporate training career.

> *I was asked to attend with other trainers and then I was left to explore my own destiny. In the beginning, I wasn't prepared. It caused me real anxiety. It was difficult and I was really stressed out. That was my biggest concern; to stand up in front of professionals to conduct training. And that was maybe the key thing that bothered me in the beginning. (Adam)*

Disengaged Participants

Six out of the nine research participants mentioned trainee disengagement as a major challenge that corporate trainers struggle with. Sami felt that this was because some participants were not attending for "any academic improvement". Rather, some trainees saw the course as an opportunity for free travel or as a chance to escape from their monotonous corporate environment. Sami delivers most of his training courses in Dubai, and most of his clients work in government sponsored organisations based in Saudi Arabia. These companies allow their employees to take one or two courses outside the country every year. In addition to paying all costs associated with the training course, these companies also provide their employees with a daily “per diem”. For Sami, the “mix” of participants who were there for different reasons presented him with a challenge as he found it difficult to engage participants who were not even interested in the training course to begin with. Sami also indicated that, with the advent of new technology, distraction has become an ever-greater challenge, as almost everyone now carries a mobile phone, which makes it even more difficult to keep participants engaged.

> *People who attended training were not necessarily there for training reasons or for any academic improvement. Some of them were there for tourism. Some were there for the per diem, which they cashed. Some of them were there to escape from the boring corporate environment. So [with] that mix, trying to get people interested in what we were doing, that was challenge number one. And then in 2000, there was a technology boom which resulted in almost everyone carrying a mobile phone. So now people had a means of staying distracted. (Sami)*

Ramsey provided an example of a disengaged participant who started missing sessions. Ramsey indicated that he felt that the participant only joined the training session as a way to travel to Dubai to have “fun”. Ramsey told the participant that unless he attended all the remaining training sessions, he would not be eligible for the training certificate at the end of the course. Despite this, the trainee did not attend, and was therefore denied a certificate.

> *I had one participant who was not attending. He was not engaging. I think he was only there to basically have fun in Dubai. So I had to talk to him on the side a couple of times and I warned him that he will not get the training certificate unless he attends the entire class. He became really angry and argued with me but still, he didn’t attend the entire course. He didn’t get the training certificate. (Ramsey)*

Rami similarly claimed that dealing with disengaged participants was the most difficult challenge he faced in his training sessions. When noticing someone who is disengaged, Rami tries different tactics to draw that person back in. However, “despite all the efforts”, he felt that participants were just not interested in learning. As a result, there is nothing he can do, which leaves him frustrated.

I don't like it when, despite all the efforts, some participants would still be disengaged. Although that's not always the case, you still have some people who are uninterested in learning despite everything I do. (Rami)

Adam stated that disengagement can also be due to the length of the training session. Some of the training courses he facilitates are professional exam preparation courses that extend beyond the normal training hours that most people are used to. Adam indicated that he felt that it was normal under these circumstances for participants to lose interest. Therefore, Adam has to try to "understand" why participants are disengaged and adjust his delivery accordingly to regain their interest.

If you're lecturing for a longer period of time, people are going to be disengaged and not be interested. So you need to time different exercises and if you find some people are disengaged, you need to understand and try to think why. (Adam)

Younes felt that this disengagement was an on-going challenge that had to be dealt with as a normal part of corporate training. For Younes, it is impossible to "keep [participants'] attention for a long period of time" and as a result, corporate trainers must try different tactics to "bring their attention back". This can be in the form of a brain teaser or an energiser, or even sometimes changing the training venue by conducting the session on the building's terrace.

You always have to find something to draw your audience's attention, especially when you feel that you're losing them. Because you cannot keep their attention for a long period of time. So sometimes you feel like you're losing them. So automatically, you have to do something to really bring their attention back. (Younes)

Language Barriers

While the official language in the UAE is Arabic, 90% of the UAE's population are expatriates (Central Intelligence Agency, 2021) and as a result, English is used as the lingua franca. All research participants were bilingual and spoke English and Arabic fluently and conducted courses in both languages. However, the need to provide courses in English posed some challenges, as some trainees did not have a good command of the English language.

Sami commented that this posed a challenge, as most of the training courses he delivered were in English. Since some of his participants did not have a strong command of the English language, he was forced to "Arabise" his delivery. Sami described "Arabisation" as a toning down of any specific accent (such as American or British) and delivering training in a more "neutral" accent that is more commonly understood in the region. This neutral accent would place more emphasis on specific phonemes. For example, trainers who studied or lived in the US and had a pronounced American accent were asked to place emphasis on the "t" in "water" rather than pronouncing it as "wader". Also, trainers were asked to speak more slowly in English and to sometimes translate their sentences into Arabic. This did not always sit well with other participants, who felt that there was sometimes a "dumbing down" of delivery and that the use of both Arabic and English in a course that was supposed to be solely in English was a waste of their time.

> *Language was also another challenge. Most of our programmes were in English and some of our participants were not at the right level. So we had to "Arabise" which was dangerous because some other participants didn't appreciate that. (Sami)*

In addition, eight of the nine research participants stated that they experienced multiple incidents in which a participant attended a training class in English but did not speak the language at all. Chad mentioned an occasion on which he was giving a training class on Advanced Communication Skills. When he asked participants to introduce themselves, one participant was silent and refused to speak. The participant then approached Chad during the break, stating that he did not want to be asked any questions in class as he did not understand English.

Fadi mentioned a similar incident, in which a client organised a training course and asked for it to be conducted in English. Fadi developed custom training material for this client according to the requirements and learning objectives he was given. However, once the training session began, Fadi discovered that all of the participants, except one, only spoke Arabic, while the sole participant who spoke English did not understand Arabic. When Fadi brought up this issue to the learning and development department responsible for scheduling the training session, they asked him to just "manage". As a result, Fadi had to conduct the course in both languages. The challenge for him was to translate material on the go without preparation while trying to give both audiences the same level of “importance”.

> *I was one time invited to a training session which was scheduled to be in English. And then when I arrived, I discovered that 17 of the 18 people, their English was not very good. And they were asking me to speak in Arabic and talk and train. One participant was from South Africa. So then I talked to the training department. They said, “Well, try to manage”. I said, “But why would you put someone who does not speak English in an English course?” It was challenging to translate and then talk to two audiences and give them the same importance, because one wanted it in Arabic, one wanted it in English, and you couldn’t really ignore both. So there was a challenge given the language barrier. (Fadi)*

Additionally, delivering courses solely in Arabic was not easy for four of the research participants who felt that, although they spoke Arabic fluently, delivery in English was easier, especially since they studied in the West. In addition, the material that they use for designing courses is always in English, and translating this material into Arabic is not always easy.

Adam mentioned that during the first seven years of training, he only gave courses in English and refused to deliver any courses in Arabic. Recently, he started delivering courses in Arabic, but he still struggles to do so, as he does not feel entirely comfortable with his Arabic language capability. Similarly, Fadi mentioned that there are some technical terms that he struggles to translate into Arabic and that he sometimes needs to depend on his participants to help him with translation. Fadi even seemed to imply that he only started giving courses in Arabic because he “had to”, as he felt pressured by his organisation.

> *I studied in the US so even though I grew up speaking Arabic, I feel more comfortable speaking English. Also, the courses that I give are highly technical and it took me a few years to even agree to give a course in Arabic. Actually, if it was up to me, I would only do courses in English but our clients mainly speak Arabic so I guess I have to. But I still sometimes feel uncomfortable. (Adam)*

Multi-Cultural Setting

Four research participants discussed the challenge of working in a multi-cultural setting where corporate trainers are expected to be engaging performers (as discussed previously), yet at the same time, take into account different cultural norms. This is not easy, as the UAE is a multi-cultural country whose population is highly diverse. While research participants said that most of their trainees were from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, research participants estimated that 20% of their attendees come from other countries such as Nigeria, the UK, India, and Pakistan.

Adam lived most of his life in the US but is originally from Jordan and speaks Arabic and English fluently. In Jordan, cultural customs differ from the UAE or Saudi Arabia, and there are certain phrases that would be considered humorous in Jordan but offensive in Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Adam mentioned such as incident when he first started training. At the end of the training day, he told his participants that he would let them go early and used a phrase in Arabic that meant "Go now for you are among those who are free", which is a phrase that was used by the Prophet Mohammed when he forgave his enemies. In Jordan or Syria, this would be considered humorous. However, for some devout Muslims in Saudi Arabia, this could be offensive, as the Prophet Mohammed was addressing the enemies of Islam. Among his class of 20 participants, two from Saudi Arabia appeared to be deeply offended.

> *I lived most of my life in the United States and sometimes you cannot say certain things here [in the UAE]. I had an incident one time where ten minutes before the end of the training session I told participants that they could leave early and I said "اذهبوا فأنتم الطلقاء" (In Arabic: Go now for you are among those who are free). Two people from Saudi Arabia really got upset. (Adam)*

Jamal recounted an event that happened to his colleague Shamil. Toward the beginning of a training session with a government organisation, Shamil asked attendees to introduce themselves and state how long they had worked at the organisation. One of the attendees mentioned that he was close to retirement as he had worked for the organisation for more than 34 years. Shamil responded jokingly that there was no way the participant could be close to retirement as he looked quite young. Shamil then asked the participant to tell him his secret as he too wanted to look that young. All the other participants laughed at this comment, but that particular participant became visibly upset. During the first break he packed his things and told Shamil that he was making an official complaint. When Shamil asked what was wrong, the participant said Shamil's comment was an insinuation that he took drugs to make him look younger. The point Jamal was making in narrating this story was that corporate trainers are sometimes tasked with training people in the same course who come from different backgrounds and have varying personalities. This difference makes it difficult to balance varying needs, as some participants want to be entertained while others might take offence at a humorous comment that was made with the best of intentions.

To underscore this point, Jamal stated that it is a "challenge" for corporate trainers to "tend to the individual needs of every participant" as participants are "diverse" and have varying levels of experience and education. For example, Jamal mentioned that he has experienced several occasions in which a senior executive such as a CEO is seated next to a recent graduate with no professional experience. This presents a challenge to Jamal as he wants to make sure that both participants are "happy" but achieving that is sometimes "impossible".

> *The challenge is to make sure that you tend to the individual needs of every participant. Participants are diverse. They have different levels of experience and education. Sometimes I have a CEO in my course who expects to learn something profound while sitting next to him is a fresh graduate who doesn't even understand the basic business terminology. How can you keep both of them happy? Sometimes, it is impossible to balance different needs. (Jamal)*

Keeping Up to Date

Finally, Adam, Jamal, Chad, and Fadi mentioned that keeping up with recent trends and developments in their area of expertise was a constant challenge. Adam attributed this to the rapid pace of development. For example, in the area of project management, Adam brought up the trend of agile project management, which is not something he worked on while he was in industry. As a result, Adam had to read up on the topic and get certified in this new specialisation as "giving old information…doesn't work anymore". However, this was "sometimes too much" for him, as "you don't have enough time" as he is trying to balance the responsibility of constant training delivery with the need to take some time off to catch up with new trends.

Adam also mentioned age as a contributing factor. While he smiled as he talked about getting older, it seemed that Adam was concerned that being older made it more difficult to learn. Perhaps Adam was alluding to the fact that spending more time delivering training courses meant that he was getting further away from what was happening in the industry.

> *There's always something new and I need to keep up to date. We cannot just give them the old information. It doesn't work anymore. So just to follow up on that is sometimes too much. Normally, you don't have enough time for that. Plus, as you get older, it's not as easy. (Adam)*

Jamal called this a process of continuous evolution of corporate trainers. Even though these trainers are experts in their field, they need to continuously build their knowledge to "become better" as technical knowledge changes and previous expertise can become obsolete.

> *To continuously develop their skills is a challenge. Obviously, we are talking about individuals who are subject matter experts who already come with their technical background. Now for these individuals to become better corporate trainers, they need to build their knowledge. Maybe I can call it something like continuous evolvement of the trainer. (Jamal)*

Similarly, Chad felt that corporate trainers need to constantly be aware of the "trends" and stay "updated" as training material can become obsolete. Fadi agreed, mentioning the need to "upgrade or upskill" training methods by staying "in touch with the industry".

> *You need to always update yourself. You need to see what are the trends. You can't rely on the same material for five, six years consecutively. No. There are lots of things that change. You have to stay updated. (Chad)*

> *In terms of getting better as trainers, the challenge is to upgrade or upskill our training methods and probably keep in touch with the industry. (Fadi)*

5.2.3 Characteristics of Effective Trainers

In this sub-theme, I discuss the key characteristics of effective trainers as described by the research participants. These characteristics include a wide mixture of skills, a commitment to corporate training, an ability to empathise with the participants, and the flexibility to adjust training methods to suit a wide range of participants.

A Package of Skills

During the interviews, research participants commented on the characteristics of effective trainers. Chad mentioned that effective training is a “package” that includes a “mixture” of several skills including technical knowledge, practical experience, and the ability to entertain the audience using educational “games” and “fun activities”.

> *Good training is a mixture of all. It’s the mixture of knowledge. It’s a mixture of the experience. It’s a mixture of the games, of the fun, of the additional skills. So it’s a package actually. (Chad)*

Jamal stated that while corporate trainers need to have solid technical knowledge in the subject area they are teaching, they also need to be able to deliver that knowledge in an “engaging” manner. Jamal referred to the “behavioural aspect” of corporate trainers, which to him meant the ability to engage the audience through storytelling, building rapport with the participants, and honing one’s body language and movement.

> *So there’s technical knowledge that they need but there’s also the behavioural aspect that they need to build. They need to work on things related to their body language and movement during a live, face to face session. They also need to work on things related to storytelling which really engages the audience and they need to work on building rapport with the audience. (Jamal)*

The Golden Key

Four research participants believed that effective trainers possess a high level of commitment to corporate training. Jamal called that commitment a “golden key” that comes from within the corporate trainer. Jamal characterised this as something that cannot be taught, as it is “individualistic” and binary: one either has it or one does not.

> *I think first of all, it comes from within, maybe that could be referred to as the golden key that everyone has to find within themselves. It’s very personal. It’s very individualistic. (Jamal)*

Chad described it as a need for being a “perfectionist” in delivering training where everything had to go right. Chad indicated that effective trainers work on all aspects of the training session, including the design of the course as well as the delivery. Effective trainers care deeply about the outcome of the training session, even going as far as taking it personally when the training session did not go well.

> *I think it’s something related to being a perfectionist. Or it is related somehow to your inner motivation and your personality. (Chad)*

Sami stated that corporate trainers need to be committed to their profession by exerting their maximum “level or physical and intellectual effort”. By the end of the training day, if Sami does not feel completely “consumed” and “exhausted”, he feels that he has not given his maximum effort and therefore, he has “short-changed” his participants. Sami described this as “giving it all” or “putting everything on the floor”.

> *My benchmark is really the level of physical and intellectual effort I put in during the programme. I measure that at the end of each day by how tired I am. When I finish a programme and I still have enough energy to go back to the office and do some work, I know that I short-changed the participants. So, giving it all, putting everything on the floor. (Sami)*

Love at First Sight

This commitment level probably comes from the passion that effective trainers feel about their profession. Rami, Fadi, Idris, and Younes all used the word “love” when describing how they felt about their work. Rami felt that his relationship with corporate training was like falling in “love at first sight”. He described trainees becoming able to solve a problem that he has just explained as a “million dollar” moment that is deeply satisfying to him.

> *It [corporate training] was like love at first sight. The moments I enjoy the most are when participants get it, when you explain something and then you give them an exercise or ask them a question, and they can actually answer it. That’s my million-dollar moment. (Rami)*

Similarly, Younes got “attached” to corporate training from the day he started. Even though Younes described himself as a deeply introverted person who generally likes spending time alone, the act of “sharing” knowledge with others was something that he loved and found “interesting”.

> *When I started corporate training, I got attached to it. I like standing in front of people and talking to them. Whether you are giving a seminar, whether you are giving a training session. It’s interesting. I love sharing with people. (Younes)*

Idris even went further, stating that he “fell in love” with corporate training from the moment he started researching it. Idris recounted the story of when he first started in the human resources department at his organisation. His manager asked him to take on the responsibility of finding training courses for employees. At that point in his career, Idris had never attended a corporate training course and did not know anything about the profession. However, as he started researching different corporate training companies and learning more about what they provide, Idris had a feeling that this was something he would deeply enjoy. As he put it during the interview, “I read about the job and I just fell in love with it”. Fadi also felt a deep sense of satisfaction that he described as “love”. For Fadi, the act of sharing was a responsibility to “pass knowledge” to others.

> *I really love it – trying to basically pass knowledge and trying to get that knowledge to other people. (Fadi)*

Empathising With Participants

Five research participants mentioned “empathy” as a key characteristic of effective trainers. For Sami, empathy is equivalent to connecting to each member of the audience on a personal level by knowing their background, their experiences, and their “motivation” for joining the training course. Sami appeared to be warning against turning corporate training into a commercial transaction in which the sole responsibility of the trainer is to transfer knowledge. Sami argued that participants need to know that the trainer cares about them on an individual level.

> *Getting to a level of empathy and touching every person in the audience. You need to know which company they come from, their designation, what motivated them to join the programme, and any other personal aspect. This makes them realise that you’re connecting with them on a personal, yet professional, level. A trainer who can get to that level has, in my opinion, ticked the right boxes. (Sami)*

Idris also indicated that effective corporate trainers are better equipped at empathising with their participants. For Idris, empathy means having the ability to gain a deeper understanding of what the participant cares about. He also mentioned applying “compassion”, which perhaps alludes to the need for corporate trainers to want to help others learn not because they are being paid for it, but because it is the right thing to do.

> *You need to understand more, to empathise more with others, and apply compassion to others. (Idris)*

While Chad did not use the word empathy, he did mention that a key characteristic was being able to “relate” and “cooperate” with participants. Chad felt that corporate trainers must be able to attend to the needs of participants in a “very high customer-oriented manner”.

> *The other competency, it is more of an attitude because it’s not quantifiable, is very important: to relate to your participants, to cooperate with your participants. You have to treat your attendees in a very high customer-oriented manner. (Chad)*

Flexibility

Chad noted that even with a fanatical level of preparation, surprises are bound to happen. A trainer can prepare rigorously for a session expecting that attendees have a certain level of knowledge when in fact that is not the case. For example, Chad delivers advanced business writing courses. Attendees for this course must be at a certain level of writing proficiency. However, that is not always the case as there are “lots of things” that do not go according to plan.

> *There are lots of surprises in in our work because sometimes you prepare a lot and then you have attendees that are a bit lower level than what you have prepared. Sometimes it’s the other way around. There are lots of things that happen not according to your plan. (Chad)*

Therefore, four of the research participants noted that corporate trainers must be flexible when conducting training sessions. Chad mentioned that because surprises are inevitable, corporate trainers must be “very accommodating, very flexible” and adjust the training according to the needs and level of the participants. Sami made a similar point by stating that corporate trainers need to “adjust the learning environment to match the needs" of the participants. However, Sami also noted that this is not a trivial skill, as this adjustment needs to be done "without forgetting the instructional objectives".

Fadi felt that corporate trainers need to be able to "analyse" the audience and understand their needs in order to "pitch" or deliver the training at the "right" level. Fadi felt that he needed to "adjust" his training methods to be able to "suit" the different needs of participants who could be at differing levels of experience.

> *I think the ability to analyse their needs and to basically pitch at the right level is key. And sometimes the challenge is to try to meet the different levels. So the ability for a trainer to basically sort of adjust their training methods to suit everyone. (Fadi)*

5.3 Theme 5: Building Communities of Practice

In this section, I discuss the fifth and final theme, which points toward the need to develop a professional community of practice in corporate training through which different corporate trainers assist each other in learning and developing. I have divided this theme into three sub-themes. The first sub-theme revolves around expert corporate trainers assisting those who are new to the profession. The second sub-theme describes how corporate trainers can learn from each other. The third sub-theme discusses the development of the learning organisation.

5.3.1 Training New Corporate Trainers

In sub-theme 5.2.2, which discussed challenges faced by corporate trainers, research participants flagged the lack of any structured pre-service training as a major difficulty that they faced at the beginning of their corporate training career. Ramsey even seemed traumatised by the experience and compared it to when he was a child learning how to swim. Suddenly, his coach just threw him into the deep end of the pool, which made him panic as he started sinking. To overcome this challenge, eight out of the nine research participants suggested methods of training new corporate trainers. These methods included establishing a formal training programme for new recruits, assigning mentors, shadowing, and a self-study programme.

Learning Ladder

Sami was concerned that in his organisation, best practices "don't trickle down". He was referring to skills that experienced corporate trainers develop during their career. These skills include learning how to design courses, becoming proficient in creating engaging activities, and using best practices in training delivery. Sami felt that "best practices" that are learnt through experience do not get passed down to the new generation of corporate trainers. As a result, new corporate trainers have to repeat the cycle of learning through doing. To remedy this, Sami called for the development of a "learning ladder" programme. New corporate trainers would be enrolled in this formal training programme, which would run over 36 months and would include different topics that corporate trainers need to master their profession.

> *Best practices don't trickle down. We need a learning ladder for new recruits, something that must be acquired in say 36 months. This can include topics like how to design a course, how to ensure learning objectives are met, delivery best practices, and also some basic topics like PowerPoint, Excel, and file management. (Sami)*

Jamal agreed with Sami's point as he also believed that new corporate trainers need to be supported through a learning portfolio that not only includes a formal training programme, but also a learning library that they can access. Rather than leaving new corporate trainers to discover supporting material on their own, they can be directed towards videos and articles that have already been collected by experienced trainers. Jamal also mentioned that some of these resources are free, perhaps referring to the cost of developing a library of training resources and anticipating the reluctance of some organisations to devote finances to training and development. By stating that these resources can be found for free, Jamal was emphasising that the cost obstacle can be overcome.

> *Here, we can think of a number of ways. There's the self-study route, where a new corporate trainer can be provided with a number of resources, a number of links, YouTube videos, reading material. There are plenty of things that one can find online. (Jamal)*

Mentorship as Armour

Chad mentioned that at the start of his corporate training career, he “had a hard time” as he was not provided with the necessary learning support. As a result, Chad felt that he was forced to “learn the hard way”, which was learning by doing. Chad questioned why he was forced to endure this experience as he could have been provided with a mentor who could have advised him on how to reflect, how to prepare for training, and how to deliver a training session. Chad felt that providing a mentor, especially at the beginning of one’s career, would act as a shield of “armour” protecting novice corporate trainers and allowing them to “stand tall” against the many obstacles they would ultimately face. Chad seemed to believe that challenges were inevitable, and that without a mentor, new corporate trainers would be in danger of a “collapse after the first ordeal”. However, the existence of a mentor could act as a “cushion” that lessens the impact of that ordeal.

> *At the beginning, I had a hard time. But did I learn the easy way? No. I learned the hard way. So why do I have to pass by this if we have a mentor who can help that person in how to reflect, how to talk, how to prepare, what are the things that might affect his delivery? You will give him a cushion, more armour to stand tall, not to fall and collapse after the first ordeal. (Chad)*

Chad went on to explain that having a mentor would have served not just to support his learning growth (which could lead to a higher salary), but also to support his “well-being and mental health”. Chad felt that providing mentors would show him that “the company cares” about him as a person. Similar to Jamal, Chad seemed to allude to the financial aspect, as the time mentors spend developing mentees would make them unavailable to provide training to paying clients. However, Chad mentioned that this would pay off in the long term as corporate trainers would be more motivated, which would reduce any potential turnover.

> *So, if I have a mentor and they are standing by me, not only from a monetary, financial point of view, even from a well-being and mental health point of view, this will increase my motivation and I feel that the company cares. It will have lots of positive results and return on investment. (Chad)*

Jamal agreed with the need for a mentorship programme, as he felt that this was “the most effective way” to develop new corporate trainers. Jamal felt that mentors would be able to “show this new corporate trainer how it is done”, which meant that mentors would have the ability to pass down best practices.

> *So for me, I think the most effective way is to have some sort of a mentorship programme, or a coupling with someone who can work individually with that person. That person would show this new corporate trainer how it is done. That person would also provide feedback to the new corporate trainer when they see them in action. (Jamal)*

Younes was one of the few research participants who actually had a mentor assigned to him in the beginning of his corporate training career. Younes spoke about how his mentor helped him hone his delivery skills by attending his training sessions and providing him with advice. This “continued for a certain period of time” until the mentor felt that Younes had developed an appropriate skill level.

> *When you first start your training, that is something new to you, to stand up in front of people. So during the training, I have my mentor sitting in the back of the room watching me, observing me, and then he has a piece of paper. By the end of every training session, and this continued for a certain period of time. He has to see you in performance and then give you the tips and pieces of advice. (Younes)*

Observant Third Eye

Rami, Jamal, and Sami suggested that an “observer”, who is not the same person as the mentor, could also be helpful in training new corporate trainers. This observer would not need to be permanently attached to a new corporate trainer, but rather, this person could be an expert trainer who could attend a few training sessions and provide a different perspective on what the trainer can do to improve. Rami mentioned that such a person would be of “great value” as he could act as a guide and provide “hints” on effective training delivery as well as instructional design.

> *I would definitely say that a third-eye or an observant eye would be a great added value. Someone that could give you hints on the way you’re delivering and the relevance of your material, the way you’re delivering the content, and how you design the exercises that are delivered. (Rami)*

Jamal described this person as a “temporary shadow” who would be assigned to the new corporate trainer for a short period of time. This shadow would be tasked with developing a plan to target certain areas of development through practice and role play.

> *The other process is to work with a professional trainer, a shadow, who can attend some sessions and follow this up with various role plays and practices. (Jamal)*

Sami mentioned that when he was in senior management, he used to "drop [in] unannounced" to attend a training session with corporate trainers and then provide them with feedback on how to improve. Sami was disappointed that his organisation stopped that practice, as he felt that an outside observer could help improve the overall quality of training sessions.

> *I was the first person in management to impose an audit on the trainers. So I physically went and dropped [in] unannounced on the trainers, attended a full day with each of the trainers and took written feedback and then went back on the same day, and shared the feedback with the trainers. It became a corporate standard which my successor continued for a while. (Sami)*

Professional Licenses

Finally, Rami and Jamal both felt that there was a need for corporate trainers to eventually become licensed. Rami felt that his responsibility was to impart knowledge and "teach others", which he characterised as a "supreme call". However, currently in the UAE, anyone can become a corporate trainer, and according to Rami, some corporate trainers are only in the profession for monetary gain. The solution proposed by Rami is a form of licensing that would restrict access to the profession to only those who have the necessary skills.

> *The call to teach others is a very supreme call, if I may say that. And those who only come to the profession for its profitable aspect shouldn't be there. So I would restrict access to this profession a bit because for now it's open. Anybody can do it. (Rami)*

Jamal agreed with this point as he felt that currently, some corporate trainers do not have the required level of skill to design and deliver effective training courses that trainees can benefit from. Jamal felt that a professional training license could be a potential solution to this problem.

> *The purpose of licensing in general is to make sure that the licensee can design and deliver at a certain level. I've seen a lot of corporate trainers who honestly are not at the level that allows them to design or deliver content that sticks. (Jamal)*

5.3.2 Sharing Knowledge

While research participants emphasised the need for pre-service training for corporate trainers, they also discussed the necessity of sharing knowledge among corporate trainers through group learning, support groups, and scheduled team reflection sessions.

Encouraging Group Work

Jamal strongly supported the idea of encouraging corporate trainers to work together through building small groups that he called "communities of practice". These groups would initially be comprised of like-minded corporate trainers who want to share best practices. While attending these sessions would be voluntary, Jamal felt that others would eventually join, as they would begin to see that sharing best practices can help upgrade everyone's skills.

> *I'm a proponent of groupwork and I strongly believe in its value. Small groups, communities of practice, can meet maybe once a month, once every two weeks, once a quarter. It will be open invitations so those willing to participate can simply walk in. Having this community of practice would certainly encourage those who are believers in teamwork to contribute more. (Jamal)*

Ramsey made a similar point and suggested that corporate trainers meet every month to discuss lessons learnt from their training sessions, or problems faced and potential solutions. To underscore this point, Ramsey mentioned how previously, he shunned the use of educational games as he thought they were a gimmick that did not belong in his technical training sessions. However, after attending an internal meeting that was organised by one of his colleagues, he learned about a new "gadget" called Kahoot, which is a game-based learning platform that can be used in training sessions. Ramsey was not even aware of such a tool and had never thought of how it could be used in his courses. However, after attending the session that was organised by his colleague, he started using Kahoot regularly as an entertaining tool to review material at the end of each day. Ramsey seemed highly appreciative of the fact that a colleague took time to teach others about a valuable tool that could enrich training courses.

> *Maybe we can have a discussion group every month where we come together so any lessons learnt, anything that you have noticed, can be shared. I have learned a lot from attending the session about new tools and gadgets such as Kahoot which I basically still use. (Ramsey)*

Younes agreed with the need for corporate trainers to meet regularly, as he felt that these meetings would help them climb the “learning curve”. This meeting would be to share best practices or to discuss the challenges they faced, the solutions they implemented, and the outcomes of these solutions.

> *If corporate trainers meet once a week, once a month, probably, and they share best practices, or they share challenges that they have faced during their training. I would say this could be a very good learning curve for the whole team. (Younes)*

Learning From Others

Jamal believed that corporate trainers should strive to attend the training sessions of “seasoned trainers” to pick up “additional tips and training techniques” that can be added to their “repertoire”. Even though Jamal has been a corporate trainer for more than a decade, he feels that he had always “picked up many techniques” every time he has attended a training course.

> *I also believe that by attending the training sessions of other seasoned trainers, will give them additional tips and techniques. Every time a trainer attends a conference, an event, another training, there are certain things that they can pick up that they have not been using that they can add to their repertoire of delivery techniques. Personally, I’ve picked up many, many techniques, small and big, every time I attend any training course. (Jamal)*

Ramsey agreed that colleagues can learn from each other by attending different courses. However, he felt that given his busy schedule, it was sometimes impossible to take time off to attend a course with a different colleague. Ramsey then spoke about his training calendar and how he had training courses booked back-to-back for the next nine months, with only weekends in between. As a work around, Ramsey suggested that each trainer document key lessons learnt which can be turned into a best practices manual.

I think it somehow still needs some kind of documentation. It will be helpful to me if each person shares his experience as a trainer with others in a written form. Imagine how much learning you can take from it. (Ramsey)

Scheduled Team Reflection

Five research participants spoke about the need to have group meetings that are particularly focused on reflection. Fadi felt that these sessions were more than team discussions about best practices. Rather, these meetings, which would be scheduled regularly, would be structured around a process of reflection that would target continuous improvement.

I think it should be put on the schedule for the people to have that team meeting where they reflect on their experiences on how they can update, how they can upskill. (Fadi)

Similarly, Idris argued that group reflection sessions are important, as they have a different dynamic than individual reflection. Idris stated that he is always surprised by how his thinking differs when he is in a group compared to when he is thinking alone. This change of dynamic interested Idris, as he indicated that a different side of him appears when he is with colleagues. While Idris did not explicitly mention whether this change is positive or negative, it appears that he felt that the group dynamic can bring forth ideas that would not surface through individual reflection.

When I reflect individually, it has a certain dynamic but when I am part of a group, there is another dynamic that surprises me. So group reflection might be an interesting way because it will expose your side, your idea, your character as part of a group. (Idris)

Similarly, Fadi suggested that a short group reflection meeting every month “will benefit everyone” as colleagues can share their experiences. He suggested that such a meeting could take the form of a group reflection on “best practices”, as some corporate trainers would have gone through an experience that others could learn from.

The team meeting will benefit everyone, right? So someone may have an experience that the other maybe didn’t have or had a different experience. It might be beneficial to have that one-hour, two-hour reflection discussion on best practices, sharing information, for the team benefit. (Fadi)

Ramsey suggested that while individual reflection is valuable, group reflection can help corporate trainers think about problems in more detail. In addition, colleagues may have faced a similar issue and already found a solution to it.

> *Individual reflection is good but discussing an issue with your colleagues helps you to basically think about it in more detail. Then somebody would ask you more questions so you go even deeper into looking at this problem or this issue and sometimes also hear from others that yes, we have the same issue and this is how you solve it. (Ramsey)*

However, not everyone thought of group reflection as a good idea. Younes indicated that reflection, by definition, is “an individual exercise” that will not work on a group level. Similarly, Adam claimed to be unsure as to whether it would be “valuable to everyone”, as everyone is “different” and some people, like him, prefer reflecting on their own attitude and behaviour rather than the attitude and behaviour of others. Adam felt that reflecting on an issue faced by others was similar to passing judgement on their actions, which he felt was wrong.

> *However, I’m not sure if this will be valuable to everyone. I mean, to put that together and share it with everyone. Because a lot of times, like me, I reflect on my own performance and my own attitude and my own behaviour versus reflecting on others. I’m not sure if we can share it together and collectively with other people because everybody is different. So again, I think it’s more personalised so I’m not sure. (Adam)*

While Chad similarly recognised that group reflection could be “powerful”, he also cautioned that it could be “less efficient” than individual reflection in certain cases. For Chad, the effectiveness of group reflection depends on the variables involved, such as the topic, where the reflection is taking place, and who is involved. Chad indicated that for some people, group reflection would be difficult given their personality, as some could be “shy” and would therefore not benefit from a group setting.

> *Group reflection is sometimes more powerful, sometimes less efficient than an individual reflection. It depends again on the personality of the people, as some people are shy at the beginning. So, I think it depends on the topic, the setting, and the people that are involved. (Chad)*

5.3.3 Developing the Learning Organisation

In this sub-theme, I outline the research participants' views regarding how corporate environments can influence learning, the importance of knowledge management, and the need to appoint a learning czar to disseminate best training practices.

Influence of the Corporate Environment

Five research participants discussed the role of the organisation in promoting learning. Jamal noted that corporate environments influence how employees learn. For example, appropriate systems and processes can ensure that knowledge "trickles" down to everyone in the organisation.

> *When you have a corporate environment that is a learning organisation in a sense, this trickles to every corporate trainer working in that environment. (Jamal)*

Jamal went on to explain that for him, the willingness to learn and adapt at an individual level is a key aspect that he expects from all people in his organisation. Jamal argued that, while having the will to learn and adapt comes from within, managers can play a role in influencing employees. This can be perhaps done by rewarding employees who develop their skills through obtaining a new degree or professional certificate.

> *It [the will to learn] also comes from corporate environments, it comes from direct managers. I strongly believe that if a corporate trainer does not have that will, at the level required, a direct manager could influence that. (Jamal)*

Similarly, Rami argued that while one cannot force people to learn, one can influence their willingness by rewarding them. For Rami, this meant creating a suitable corporate environment where those who learn are rewarded.

> *I would reward them to do it, not force them. Learning cannot be imposed. So for learning activities, I would really create the suitable environment for that to happen. (Rami)*

Chad called this corporate environment "company presence", and he appeared to imply that companies have personalities that dictate how people behave. This company presence can influence how people act by motivating the right behaviours through formal rewards.

> *Not all people have the same inner motivation and sometimes that motivation can be increased with the company presence. (Chad)*

Knowledge Management

Ramsey stated that a learning organisation must have certain processes and systems in place. These processes and systems could make it easier for employees to capture and disseminate learning.

> *And then basically, you have to somehow have a process or system to, as a company, encourage us to support learning. (Ramsey)*

Jamal referred to this as a process of managing knowledge. To him, organisations have a large amount of "tacit knowledge" that already exists. However, a portion of that knowledge gets lost, as it only exists in the minds of individuals. Once those individuals leave, then that knowledge is lost. Therefore, Jamal argued for a way to capture that knowledge in order to share it with new and existing corporate trainers.

> *This fits into the whole field of knowledge management and how organisations manage tacit knowledge which already exists. (Jamal)*

Fadi spoke extensively about the need for an effective knowledge management system. He first gave an example of how knowledge is currently scattered and hard to access when it comes to repeat clients. When Fadi is assigned a training session for a certain client, he first attempts to find out if any of his colleagues have given any training sessions to that same client. This is a manual process that involves him picking up the phone and calling his colleagues to find out if they have any tips regarding the client, such as their preferred course timings, where the training is usually located, the average engagement level of the attendees, and their level of English knowledge.

> *So when I have an assignment with a repeat client, I need to find out if anyone has worked with that client before. I want to know more about the client's preferences and if the participants they send are at a senior or junior level and how easy it will be for me to communicate*

> *with them in English. It's frustrating sometimes because all that knowledge already exists. We just haven't captured it. (Fadi)*

To ensure the capture of knowledge, Fadi emphasised that his organisation needs a knowledge management system that captures what happened in previous assignments. In the interview, he described how this process would work, as each client would have a file and after each training assignment, the trainer would document his experience and include details about any incidents and any proposed tips.

> *I one time thought about having it on the company level. I suggested that we create an intranet where we have a file for each client. And everyone can just go there and update and add to their experience. So if I have client XYZ and I discovered this is what they do, or this is what happened with me, I would go there and just log my experience. So if you want to go there, you open the client file that multiple people have put their incidents and logs on and you can use that to prepare for your next assignment. (Fadi)*

While Fadi appeared to be disappointed by the fact that "nothing ever happened with my suggestion", he indicated that "[m]aybe we need to bring it up again".

Learning Czar

To ensure that knowledge is captured, Sami suggested that someone in the organisation be appointed as a "learning czar" who has the authority and responsibility for collecting and disseminating best training practices. Sami indicated that currently, institutional knowledge is "scattered" in different places, including in the minds of different trainers. This institutional knowledge should be extracted, collected, and organised in a way that it can be easily shared with other corporate trainers.

> *This [institutional learning] is scattered all over the place but someone has to be accountable for collecting and formalising it. Someone like a learning czar who is accountable for making it happen. (Sami)*

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how research participants perceived themselves as naturally talented "performers" who often "stumbled" into corporate training by chance. The recognition of their talent was not something they necessarily recognised within themselves but rather, was identified by expert corporate trainers who saw in them an “innate ability”.

Research participants also discussed challenges in their profession including an inadequate level of pre-service training, disengaged trainees who were uninterested in learning, the difficulties associated with delivering training in a multi-cultural setting, and finding enough time to “keep up to date” with changes in their area of specialisation. This struggle to stay current posed a significant concern, highlighting the ongoing tension between delivering training and staying abreast of emerging developments.

Finally, research participants discussed the need for corporate trainers to build communities of practice. This involved the launch of a “learning ladder” to develop necessary skills, the creation of a mentorship programme to “shield” new corporate trainers from the “ordeals” of the profession, the appointment of a “learning czar” to disseminate best practices, the creation of a knowledge management system to capture “tacit” knowledge, and the scheduling of regular group reflection sessions where corporate trainers could learn collaboratively.

5.5 Discussion

According to Beauchamp (2015), identity development is an important aspect of reflection. Farrell (2011) explored how teachers constructed their professional role identities through reflective practice. He wrote that reflecting on role identity can provide educators with a useful lens to view how they construct and reconstruct a conceptual sense of their self-image and their professional role in relation to their context (Farrell, 2011). The relationship between reflection and professional identity was also studied by Morgan et al. (2013). Their findings provided insights into the influence of reflective practice on professional identity and development in relation to two themes. The first theme emphasised relationships, as participants in their study felt an enhanced connection with their colleagues. The second theme revolved around the exploration of self and professional identity, as participants “were very clear about how they saw themselves as workers and how this connected with the values that were important to them” (Morgan et al., 2013, p. 266).

The necessity of building communities of practice within the corporate training domain also emerged from the research. Reflective practice is deeply embedded within communities of practice, as members do not merely reflect on their personal experiences, but rather, they share their reflections with other members (Wenger, 1998). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), group reflection within communities of practice can significantly contribute to the evolution of shared resources and collective knowledge. As members articulate and share their reflections, the community collaboratively identifies best practices and discerns key lessons (Lesser & Storck, 2001). As a result, the dynamic body of knowledge encapsulated within a community of practice enhances the community's collective expertise, informs its future practices, and reinforces the professional identities of its members (Wenger et al., 2002).

6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to critically examine the findings that emerged from this study and relate them to the study's research questions: How does a group of corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection in their professional practice? How do these corporate trainers engage in reflection? Can they enhance their reflective practice and if so, how? Throughout this chapter, findings are interpreted through the lens of my theoretical framework that drew on two sources: Donald Schön's work on reflective practice, and the writings of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky on higher mental functions.

Section 6.2 addresses the first research question by discussing how corporate trainers conceptualise reflection as a tool for continuous self-development. In section 6.3, I answer the second research question by arguing that the research participants' description of the act of reflection corresponds to a Vygotskian process. Section 6.4 addresses the third research question and discusses how corporate trainers can become more effective reflective practitioners by using additional mediational tools such as reflective writing.

6.2 Reflection: A Critical Tool for Continuous Self-Development

6.2.1 Introduction

While there are many prescriptive studies of what reflection *should* look like for professionals in different areas (Bindels et al., 2018), there are no studies on how practising corporate trainers *actually* conceptualise reflection, and how this conceptualisation corresponds with existing research. In this section, I present the findings related to my main research question regarding how corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection. I also discuss how this conceptualisation corresponds or diverges from the literature.

6.2.2 Continuous Self-Development Through Reflection

All research participants were in agreement that reflection is a critical tool for continuous individual development. For Chad, regular reflection is an opportunity for constant self-development in an attempt to reach a "perfectionist" level that perhaps describes the highest level of professionalism. Sami described the benefits of constant reflection via the concept of “Kaizen”, the Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices (Singh & Singh, 2009). Fadi compared reflection to the act of “sharping the saw”, a term used by Covey (2013) to describe the process of constant self-renewal. Fadi also described reflection as a process of constantly “pushing yourself” in order to improve performance. This description overlaps with Chad’s point about the pursuit of perfection through continuous improvement. Similarly, Jamal referred to reflection as process of “continuous evolution” that conjures an image of constant change and adaptation with the goal of improvement. Idris described reflection as a tool for continuous development and active “growth”.

In addition, there was broad agreement among the participants that reflection is a continuous journey. Idris and Fadi both described reflection as an “unending process”. Chad went further by explaining the reasoning behind describing reflection as a “never-ending exercise”. For Chad, reflection results in improvement, which ultimately benefits the person reflecting. As a result, this person “wants” to reflect more. Therefore, reflection has the potential to evolve into a virtuous cycle where reflection results in improvement, which motivates the person to reflect even more.

This finding is in broad agreement with the majority of literature that considers reflection a powerful tool for professional development (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987). According to Schön (1987), reflection can lead to new understandings as professionals consciously review, examine, and evaluate their experiences, resulting in new insights about their practice and improving future performance. Through reflection, professionals can become more creative and flexible, resulting in an enhancement of their professional effectiveness (Rogers, 2001). This improved future performance is what research participants referred to as continuous development.

6.2.3 Learning From Experience Through Reflection

Within corporate training, a major challenge that participants referred to was the lack of a formal pre-service training programme for new trainers. Participants felt that they were left to fend for themselves and learn on the job. Ramsey's description was perhaps the most vivid. He compared the beginning of his corporate training career to the trauma of learning how to swim when he was just "thrown into the deep end" and expected to learn how to float. Even though Ramsey's background was in *practicing* finance, he was suddenly asked to *teach* finance, without any help to transition between these two areas. For Adam, the expectation of being able to successfully morph from a technical professional to a corporate trainer without any preparation caused him "anxiety" and "stress" at the beginning of his career.

The lack of pre-preparation in the corporate training industry appears to be a common problem. Karmel et al. (2014) argued that most corporate trainers enter the industry without any specific training on how to effectively train. Rather, they rely "solely on their industry experience which they adapt and reapply for their training" (Karmel et al., 2014, p. 14). This lack of training in how to train is also supported by Gauld and Miller (2004) who argued that most corporate trainers are skilled technically but are not given adequate training in effective adult education techniques. The assumption that an individual with deep technical knowledge can become an effective trainer without adequate preparation can have results "that are often disastrous for the students, the trainer, and the organization" (Gauld, 2015, p. 119).

Without proper preparation, how can corporate trainers build up their repertoire of skills and become more effective professionals? How can corporate trainers deal with the challenges that they face in the classroom? The answer to both of these questions seems to be the following: Research participants used reflection as one way to learn from experience, improve their skills, and deal with challenges within their profession.

The relationship between reflection and experiential learning is supported by Boyd and Fales (1983) who assert that reflection is "the key element in learning from experience" (p. 100). Daudelin (1996) reinforces this notion by arguing that deliberate reflection on a certain situation can significantly increase learning from that experience. Similarly, Boud et al. (2006) stated that "reflection is a key mechanism in understanding our experience and drawing lessons from it" (p. 4). Reflection, as described by Schön (1983), is how professionals acquire knowledge and gain new insights that can be used for practice change. This is supported by Kolb (1984) who considers reflection to be an integral part of the learning cycle. According to Kolb (1984), new insights can only be achieved if professionals actively reflect on an experience. This reflective process can generate novel ideas and methods that practitioners can subsequently apply in their practice.

6.2.4 A Temporal Dimension for Reflection

In my literature review and theoretical framework, I discussed the temporal nature of reflection, as reflection can occur before action, in action, or after action.

Reflection Before-Action Is an Integral Component

Interviewees considered reflection prior to taking action as an important aspect of reflection. Sami argued that preparation, which he described as the "big P", is a critical part of delivering a successful training session. Younes described reflection before action as a "ritual" in which he consciously thinks about what he should say and what he should do during the different phases of the training course. Sami described this visualisation as a "mental chess game" that includes anticipating audience actions. Chad went further by arguing that training is "90% preparation and 10% presentation".

This finding is in agreement with research by Edwards (2017) and Postholm (2008) who stated that as an educator prepares for an event, they are reflecting *before action* to ensure the success of that event. Boud and Walker (1998) noted that reflection by educators prior to a teaching session is just as important as reflection during, or after, that session, as "understanding beforehand the factors that may be operating within the future learning event is necessary in order to work creatively within that event" (Boud & Walker, 1998, p. 203). Moreover, this finding is in agreement with the criticism targeted at Schön's depiction of reflective practice as occurring only "in" or "after" action but not "before". Greenwood (1993) argued that Schön's model needs to value reflection before action, as many errors in various professions are committed because practitioners sometimes fail to stop and think before acting.

However, there are two possible limitations to reflection before action. The first limitation is that perceptions of a future situation can be influenced by our prior experiences, biases, and assumptions, which can all limit our ability to see things objectively. Teekman (2000) argued that the act of reflecting does not automatically result in improved practice. Greenwood (1993) went even further by warning that reflection can sometimes reinforce incorrect practices. According to Teekman (2000), Schön was aware of this limitation and advocated a model of coaching by experts.

The second limitation is the tendency of some professionals to place less importance on the value of reflection before action as they gain more experience. This was mentioned by Adam, who claimed that preparation was more important in his first year of corporate training. However, as he gained more confidence through experience, he became able to "wing it" without the need for preparation. This can perhaps lead to corporate trainers, especially those with experience, repeating the exact same method of training, regardless of whether that method is effective or not.

Reflection-in-Action for Changes on the Go

Participants described reflection-in-action in the context of facing a challenge during their training sessions and having to solve problems "on the go". Younes described this as a "feeling" he gets when he is "losing" his audience as they seem disengaged. This causes him to change exercises or his delivery method with the aim of recapturing audience attention. Similarly, Rami described training sessions in which he needed to change the training material and exercises in real time as he felt that his attendees were too advanced for the existing content. Participants felt that the ability to change things "on the go" came from prior experience. According to Younes, this ability is developed over time as a professional becomes more experienced in their craft.

This depiction of reflection-in-action is similar to findings by Schön, who referred to reflection-in-action as a process in which professionals need to think on their feet (Smith, 2001). For Schön, reflection-in-action can be defined as the thought process that occurs as a certain experience unfolds, guiding action with the experience

(Schön, 1983). Perhaps what is interesting in this finding is that participants seemed to focus less on reflection as a tool to be used “in” action and more on the importance of reflection before action (preparation for the future) and reflection on-action (learning from the past).

Reflection After Action for Improving Professional Practice

Reflection after action, which has also been described as reflection-on-action, refers to reflection that happens after the conclusion of a given event or experience (Rogers, 2001). Participants appeared to identify reflection after action as the main professional improvement tool. Fadi described reflection-on-action as his “espresso or eureka moment” where, after a training session, he sits down with a cup of coffee and thinks about what happened during the day. This produces results that he uses to enhance future training sessions. Adam describes reflection-on-action as looking back and determining what his participants liked and what they did not like in order to update his material and approach. For Chad, reflection-on-action was about putting together a checklist that can improve his future training courses. Similarly, Fadi stated that his reflection-on-action results in new case studies or exercises that he can use.

This is broadly in agreement with the current research. Schön (1983) defines reflection-on-action as a process of thinking back on an experience with the aim of acquiring new knowledge or gaining new insights that can be used for practice change. In a sense, reflection-on-action is a cognitive post-mortem in which an individual consciously thinks about past actions and appraises potential areas of improvement (Wilson, 2008).

6.2.5 Reflection Is Autodidactic

While all participants strongly believed that reflection is an important tool for self-development, none of the interviewees could recall having participated in a formal course on reflection either in university or through any professional development course. Rather, findings from my research present an impression that reflection is a cognitive process that effective corporate trainers just “did”, each according to their own understanding. Sami confirmed this by stating that reflection is “not something that I learned formally. It’s just something that naturally occurred to me to rewind and pause". Similarly, Jamal stated that reflection is not something that corporate trainers have learnt "formally" but rather, it was a "personalised tool" that is "different" for each corporate trainer, and that some "might have a better understanding of reflection than others". Younes, who has a doctorate in business administration and has taught courses at a university level, did not recall attending any training on reflection and stated that reflection is just something that "effective trainers do" and that the process "would vary between one trainer and another".

This lack of formal training on how to become a reflective practitioner within the context of corporate training departs from two significant and connected trends. The first trend is the considerable, and continuously growing, body of evidence that supports the professional benefits of becoming a more effective reflective practitioner (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987). According to Russell (2005), formal training on reflection is critical, as "the results of explicit instruction seem far more productive than merely advocating reflective practice" (Russell, 2005, p. 199). By leaving reflection as a haphazard notion that individuals pick up naturally, and without formal instruction, professionals will not be able to understand how becoming a reflective practitioner differs from regular thinking (Russell, 2005).

The second trend, which pertains to the recognition of the value of reflection in professional practice, is the proliferation of training on reflection in pre-service programmes or continuing professional development in various professions such as teaching, nursing, medicine, social work, the legal field, and the police force. For many professions, reflection is an important development tool, as it "appears in virtually every professional training mission statement or policy document as an espoused objective of professional training" (Bright, 1996, p. 163).

However, within corporate training, there is no programme that educates trainers on how to become a more effective reflective practitioner. In the conclusion to this study, I will elaborate on the need for introducing formal training on reflection within corporate training and how such a programme could be implemented.

6.2.6 Reflection Is Viewed Through an Individual-Centric Lens

Participants viewed reflection through an individual centric lens. In all interviews, the words “self”, “individual”, and “personal” were frequently repeated, as it seemed that reflection was thought of as a personal tool that is mainly used to improve individual productivity. For example, both Sami and Younes added the word “self” when discussing reflection and linked it to their own individual performance. Sami stated that “self-reflection is asking yourself how could I have done better” while Younes said, “It’s like a self-reflection of your own performance”. Similarly, Adam stated that he reflected on his “own performance” while Chad described reflection as a “personal” process that is linked to “self-development”.

In chapter two, I noted that this individualistic view of reflection as described by Dewey and Schön has been criticised (Boud, 2010). Reynolds (1998) states that contemporary organisations are characterised by high levels of team collaboration and group work. Therefore, Boud (2010) suggests that reflective practice needs an expanded definition, beyond those previously considered in individual reflection, which takes into account new professional practices that are oriented towards groups and organisations. In his writings, Boud (2010) defines a specific type of reflection that he calls productive reflection. Productive reflection “engages with the context and purpose of work and, most importantly, with the imperative that reflection in such settings cannot be an individual act if it is to influence work that takes place with others” (Boud, 2010, p. 31). Productive reflection has a collective orientation that involves multiple stakeholders, connects learning and working, and is an open and dynamic process that is continuously changing (Cressy and Boud, 2006, as cited in Boud, 2010).

This study’s finding that research participants think of reflection through an individual centric lens is therefore significant. In section 6.3, I discuss in more detail how the individual centric lens of reflection should be expanded to further include groups and organisations.

6.2.7 The Absence of Critical Reflection

As discussed in the literature review, critical reflection can be thought of as a subset of reflection, albeit with a sharper focus (Van Beveren et al., 2018). According to Mezirow (1990), critical reflection is "reserved to refer to challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning" (p. 4). Similarly, Brookfield (1998) defined critical reflection as "a process of inquiry involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work" (p. 197). This challenging of one's assumptions needs to include a better understanding of power while going "beyond individualism or 'atomism' to appreciate the significance of the wider social context" (Thompson & Pascal, 2012, p. 322).

Data from the interviews did not reveal any evidence of critical reflection by corporate trainers. Mainly, corporate trainers were concerned about their individual performance or professional identity. The concerns they raised had more to do with how society affected them rather than how they affected society. For example, research participants spoke about the difficulty in working with disengaged participants and the challenge of working in a multi-cultural setting. However, they did not seem to question why participants were disengaged and how their profession had an impact on the society.

Perhaps Idris came closest when he referred to reflection as a multi-layered concept. The outer layer, which he referred to as the surface level, is the beginning point of reflection, which starts with some basic questions regarding what was said and done. Reflectors reach the second layer when they dig "deeper" by trying to understand the "triggers" that prompted them to respond in a certain way or to act in a particular fashion. The third layer is where reflectors attempt to understand more about their identity by questioning what they know and what is "behind" the trigger. For Idris, the first layer, or the surface layer, is a superficial level that does not reveal enough. He indicated that the process of reflection needs to take us deeper until we understand our personal "programming".

The lack of critical reflection within the context of corporate training is perhaps due to the commercial nature of the profession, in which financial considerations are paramount and corporate trainers are constantly worried about their productivity. This is supported by Rigg et al. (2008) who argued that critical reflection in commercial settings is difficult given the complexity of the power dynamics between multiple stakeholders in the workplace. Practicing critical reflection in the workplace "can lead to unsettled individuals, disgruntled customers, clients in dilemma and facilitators as repositories for participants' emotions" (Rigg et al., 2008, p. 382). In addition, critical reflection has some known drawbacks, such as "over self-critical inspection and the infinite regress of reflection on action" (Smith, 2011, p. 1). There are personal risks involved, as critical reflection can lead to the questioning of long held values and ideals, which in turn, can create a deeply uncomfortable dissonance (Rigg et al., 2008).

This finding can be used to propose a topic of further research within the area of reflection and corporate training that can include the following research questions: How can critical reflection in corporate training lead to improved professional practice? Does challenging assumptions about social structure functions lead to transformative actions?

6.2.8 Reflection and Performativity

A finding that is closely related to the absence of critical reflection in corporate training is the relationship between reflection and the achievement of performance targets. For example, when Sami was discussing various challenges in his work, he stated that "for me personally, the biggest, biggest, challenge was to justify the fees". For Sami, it seemed that he had certain targets that needed to be met and his concern was how he could ensure that his participants received, as he described it, "their money's worth". Similarly, Rami touched on the issue of performance when discussing the triggers of reflection. Rami stated that receiving negative feedback from participants spurs him to "reflect" on what he did "wrong" and how he can change his training in the future.

> *When I do a good job but the participant feedback says otherwise, I go back to reflect on what might have gone wrong. Maybe I could have provided more examples or I could have had done more relevant activities. That brings me to go back and, in some cases, to change my material, change the training that I'm going to deliver for the next time. (Rami)*

Interestingly, Rami seemed to equate receiving negative feedback from attendees with doing something “wrong”. This perspective, while valid in certain cases, might stem from reasons unrelated to the course material or the trainer's performance. For example, Sami argued that some participants did not register for training courses with the primary intent to learn but rather, for “tourism”, “to cash in their per diems”, or “to escape from boring corporate environments”. For these participants, dissatisfaction could be a result of them having to sit through a topic that did not interest them to begin with.

The danger in a strong relationship between reflection and performativity is that reflection can become superficial as practitioners focus on actions that enable them to meet their performance targets, rather than on actions that result in improving their practice. This is supported by Benade (2012) who cautioned that the 21st century learning imperative has morphed reflection into “a techno-instrumentalist view of schooling and education” (p. 337). Similarly, MacRuairc and Harford (2008) warned that reflection has become a part of a performance driven agenda that favours a performativity culture. Dimova and Loughran (2009) add that the expertise of the reflective practitioner will certainly be minimised as practice settings are pressured by increased bureaucratic checklists. In their research on the injection of reflection into UK higher education progress files, Clegg and Bradley (2006) found that participants viewed reflection as a tick-box process that nullified any engagement.

In this context, reflection becomes a means of fulfilling external requirements, rather than a process of genuine inquiry and learning. To avoid this, corporate trainers should perhaps approach reflection with a willingness to question their assumptions and a commitment to authentic learning and development rather than just focusing on meeting pre-determined corporate outcomes.

6.3 A Vygotskian Model of Reflection

6.3.1 Introduction

Examining the process of reflection through the theoretical framework I previously outlined shows that *how* research participants reflect aligns with the Vygotskian model of reflection. This model, which was adapted from Shepel (1999), occurs on two planes, the real plane and the ideal plane, and includes six distinct steps. In the next sections, I discuss each step and how it links to the approach discussed by the research participants.

6.3.2 A Moment of Realisation (A1)

In the Vygotskian model, the reflective journey begins on the real plane, with a person performing a practical action and realising there is a deficiency or developmental gap (A1). This corresponds to the findings outlined in section 4.2.1 on the triggers of reflection, which Rogers (2001) described as antecedent conditions to reflection such as an unusual situation (Rogers, 2001), values-conflict (Schön, 1983), or a state of puzzlement (Loughran, 2002). Research participants described these triggers as critical incidents, moments of pain and self-blame, situations that go wrong, or challenges that need to be addressed.

Sami gave an example of a critical incident that happened to him 25 years ago, in which a participant complained about one of his exercises. Sami was given a "dressing down" by his company's chairman, which triggered the process of reflection and caused him to work on improving his "flexibility and adaptability". Idris stated that a major trigger of reflection for him was a negative emotion that he described as "pain". Similarly, Rami argued that unwanted outcomes are a major trigger of reflection by stating that reflection is "especially" caused by things going wrong. Jamal described being faced with a challenge as another trigger for reflection, citing as examples a difficult question from a participant that he is not adequately prepared to answer or a projector not working as expected. Rami described challenges as a "problem that needs to be solved".

While research participants gave different reasons for what triggers reflection, all of them seemed to agree that reflection is triggered by a realisation that something is not quite right. This causes them to mentally transport to the ideal plane as described by the Vygotskian model.

6.3.3 Reconstructing Reality (A2)

The next step in the Vygotskian model is for the reflector to transition from the real plane to the ideal plane. On this plane, the reflector has the ability to reconstruct reality as it happened. The need for transportation to this plane was described by

Idris as an urge “to get out of my head”. Sami described the ideal plane as a place where he can reconstruct events by “playing back” the day as if it were a video that could be “stopped” on demand at specific moments of interest. Ramsey represented this step as “going back” into the past in an attempt to visually reconstruct an event as he understood it. For Rami, the ideal plane is a place where events are stored and can be taken out and brought back into the light when needed for a clearer “perspective”.

6.3.4 Choosing a Set of Mediational Tools (A3)

The third step in the Vygotskian model is for the reflector to choose a specific set of cultural tools that can mediate the process of reflection (Shepel, 1999). These symbolic mediational tools are culturally specific and can be metaphors, reflective dialogue with self or others, narrative/text, or other symbolic systems (Shepel, 1999). Findings show that while all participants used internal dialogue as a mediational tool, external dialogue and the use of text were not common. This is a key finding, as the use of external dialogue and reflective writing can enrich the process of reflection. I will further expand on this point in section 6.4.

Reflective Monologues

All nine corporate trainers used inner dialogue in the process of reflection. For example, Sami stated that reflection includes an “asking” phase in which he poses questions to himself. Similarly, Adam’s internal dialogue entails “questioning” himself about his effectiveness. Chad was more descriptive about this internal dialogue, as he posed a series of questions to himself including “What did I learn? What happened? Can it be better?”

Self-questioning can be an effective reflection strategy (Teekman, 2000). This self-questioning, which Doel et al (2002) as cited in Tsang (2007) refer to as “reflective soliloquy” (p. 50), is an internal conversation that includes both questions and answers posed by the reflector about a certain experience. However, the quality of such dialogue depends on the reflector’s ability to ask pertinent questions (Tsang, 2007). Tools to enhance the effectiveness of this internal dialogue include reflective journals (Gray, 2007; O’Connell & Dyment, 2011) and a critical incident log that helps reflectors access memories from a certain experience, elaborate on the meanings of that memory, and consider various counterfactual scenarios (Boud, 2001). However, none of the participants used these or any other tools to enrich their internal dialogue.

Reflective Duologues and Polylogues

While Teekman (2000) agrees that self-questioning can be an effective tool for reflection, he argues that self-dialogue “can’t compensate for, or replace, dialogue with colleagues” (Teekman, 2000, p. 1132). This is because the reflector might be unable to understand certain gaps, emotions, or perceptions in certain experiences, while outside observers can see situations from a different angle and thus provide a better understanding of the events in question (Teekman, 2000, p. 1132).

The findings of the current study corroborate such a view, as most participants agreed that talking with someone else can add to their own understanding of events. For example, Idris mentioned that a person who self-reflects on an event can miss vital information, and that including another person is therefore more beneficial as “two heads are better than one”. Rami described the benefit of having a “third eye”, or an observer, who can provide a different perspective which allows one to gather more information about how others perceive him or her. Chad argued that mentors are critical for continuous improvement, as they help professionals see their own strengths and weaknesses. However, while most participants see the benefit in regular discussions with a colleague, whether as part of a mentorship or coaching programme, none appeared to regularly practice reflective duologues. Only Sami stated that he regularly seeks discussions with others about his performance, indicating that he actively solicits feedback from not just colleagues, but also clients.

Another possible benefit of reflective duologues and polylogues is the expanded use of language through the use of metaphors. For example, during the interviews, research participants used metaphors frequently when reflecting on their profession, the challenges they face, and how they solve problems. For example, Sami compared corporate trainers to “performers” who are on a “stage” performing for an audience and catering to their specific needs. Idris also referred to corporate trainers as performers by mentioning that trainers are in the “spotlight” similar to a performer on stage. Idris characterised a corporate trainer as a storyteller who constantly needs to grab the attention of the audience through different twists and turns of the story.

However, it is unclear if the research participants would have used metaphors if they were engaged in self-dialogue. During the interviews, the participants' metaphors seemed to arise spontaneously when corporate trainers were attempting to explain a certain concept or when they were trying to make meaning from a certain event. This is similar to findings by Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019) who stated that "metaphor as a mediational means is a dynamic cognitive tool that leads reflective thought to the exploration of new meanings" (p. 287).

This is also an area that I expand on in section 6.4, where I highlight the importance of including others in reflective discussions.

Reflective Writing

Within the repertoire of reflective tools, reflective writing is perhaps the most established component, known to be central to the notion of learning from experience (Jasper, 2016). Reflective practice literature points to the ability of reflective writing to develop the writer's ability to develop new perspectives on different issues (Jasper, 2016). Boud (2001) states that "writing is a means of puzzling through what is happening in our work and in our lives" (p. 10). As practitioners put down onto paper various thoughts and reflections, they can find themselves constructing deeper meanings and, subsequently, greater learning. Boud (2001) endorses this view by asserting that "learning is inherent in any process of expression, that is, in any way of giving form to the world as experienced" (p. 9).

However, findings from this study showed that only one out of the nine participants thought of writing as a valuable reflection tool. Idris described writing as a "remarkable" tool that allows the "brain to slow down" and think of problems from different perspectives. Idris mentioned that writing allows the person experiencing negative emotions to "get them out". He also mentioned that documenting issues allows a person to come back to them at a later time and revisit the incident.

None of the eight other research participants used writing as a mediational means to enhance the process of reflective thinking. Rami referred to a colleague who diligently documents the “lessons learnt” after each training course. While Rami thought that such a system could be helpful, he thought that it would be “too rigid” for him, and difficult to adhere to. This is also an area that I expand on in section 6.4, where I discuss how writing can help corporate trainers enhance the process of reflection.

Other Mediational Means

There are other mediational means that have been shown to add value to the reflection process such as diagrams (Van der Riet, 2008), pictures (Hilppö et al., 2017), repertory grids and concept maps (Gray, 2007). However, other than self-dialogue, findings did not point to any other mediational means that participants use when reflecting.

6.3.5 Consideration of Different Future Actions (A4)

The process then continues with a modelling exercise that takes into consideration different future actions (A4). Rami’s reflection included thinking about alternative course of actions and “checking” if a different course of action would have been possible. It seems that to Rami, the process of reflection is about *considering* if an alternative course of action would have been possible. Similarly, Younes mentioned that during the process of reflection, different ideas would “click” for him, such as the use of different exercises in order to improve future training sessions.

6.3.6 Developing a Plan of Action (A5) and Action Implementation (A6)

The final two steps include the development of a plan of action (A5) followed by testing that action in the real plane (A6). For participants, this included testing the action and getting feedback about whether the change was positive. For example, Rami stated that he recently had to change the training material after he found out that the current structure did not work. After changing the material, the feedback was positive, which signalled to him that the change had been beneficial.

> *I champion a course and I recently changed the whole flow of material because I found that during the training, the current material was not helping. I designed activities that made more sense and the feedback was really, really nice to see. (Rami)*

Similarly, Adam described how reflection led to action which he tested out in the field and found that it worked “like a miracle”.

> *I revisited this exercise and somehow I was able to shrink it, trying not to lose the main value – or the core value at least. And it worked, it worked! It was like a miracle. (Adam)*

6.4 Improving Reflection

6.4.1 Introduction

In this section, I discuss the findings related to the third and final research question: Can UAE corporate trainers enhance their reflective practice and if so, how? I begin by arguing that since reflection seems to be a didactic process that research participants have developed organically, corporate trainers would benefit from learning more about reflection through a series of awareness sessions. I then proceed to discuss the mediational tools that the research participants used and assert that the current use of self-dialogue is insufficient. I propose that other mediational means, such as reflective writing and group reflection, can increase the benefit of reflection. Finally, I establish the case for using reflection for organisational learning rather than just as a tool for self-development.

6.4.2 Reflection Awareness Workshop

As discussed previously, none of the interviewees could recall having participated in a formal course on reflection either in university or through any professional development courses. Rather, reflection was presented as a cognitive process that effective corporate trainers just “did”, each according to their own understanding. Sami confirmed this by stating that reflection is “not something that I learned formally. It’s just something that naturally occurred to me to rewind and pause”. Similarly, Jamal stated that reflection is not something that corporate trainers have learnt “formally” but rather, it was a “personalised tool” that is “different” for each corporate trainer and that some “might have a better understanding of reflection than others”.

Perhaps this is due to the technical positivist educational background of the research participants, as most had technical degrees in engineering, finance, or accounting. Personally, my first introduction to reflection as a practice was through the EdD programme as my previous university degrees did not include any discourse on reflection. Since it appears that reflection within corporate training is autodidactic, I believe that an awareness workshop that educates corporate trainers on reflection as a practice can be helpful.

Educating professionals on reflection is strongly supported by Russell (2005) who argues that reflection “can and should be taught – explicitly, directly, thoughtfully and patiently” (p. 203). This is a position supported by several authors (Etscheidt et al., 2012; Husu et al., 2008; Williams & Grudnoff, 2011). Russell (2005) argued that the complexity of reflection has been underestimated and that “[f]ostering reflective practice requires far more than telling people to reflect and then simply hoping for the best” (Russell, 2005, p. 203).

I agree with Russell (2005), whose research included studying the impact of teaching pre-service teachers about reflection. Initially, his students referred to reflection as “fluff” (Russell, 2005, p. 203), but eventually came to see significant value in the process of purposeful reflection. Similarly, I believe corporate trainers can benefit from a series of workshops, or at least one workshop, that explains the concept of reflection and how it can be used more effectively as a professional development tool.

While there is not much academic literature on how to design and run an initial awareness workshop on reflection, research by Glazer et al. (2004) and Taggart and Wilson (2005) can provide some guidance. Glazer et al. (2004) worked with a group of five teachers on sessions to investigate the nature of professional reflection that ultimately resulted in the development of a process of collaborative reflection. They suggested that initial sessions should be short and participant attendance should be optional. Preferably, the facilitator should be an outsider, as invitees may feel a stronger obligation to attend in such cases. Characteristics of this facilitator are important and should “include trustworthiness, empathy, teaching experience, and training that supports facilitating reflective discussions” (Glazer et al., 2004, p. 34). Taggart and Wilson (2005) suggested that an initial workshop on reflection should start by asking participants to define reflection, share their definition with a colleague, and then discuss these definitions with the rest of the group. The facilitator can also distribute the most common definitions of reflection from the academic literature such as definitions by Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983). After reaching a consensus on the definition, participants can then work on understanding steps in the reflective thinking cycle by role playing its application within a real case study.

Based on the above guidance, the following is an outline of an initial reflection awareness session:

- **Introduction**: An overview of the concept of reflection, why it is important, and how it can benefit individuals and organisations.
- **Tools:** Exploring various reflective tools such as journaling, group reflection, and individual reflection.
- **Reflection exercises:** Designed to help participants explore their thoughts and feelings, obtain new insights, and develop self-awareness.
- **Group discussions:** Participants can share their reflections and learn from each other's experiences.

More details on the workshop structure and content would make for a valuable topic for future research.

6.4.3 Enhancing the Repertoire of Mediational Tools

According to Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019), the Vygotskian concept of reflection is mediated by a set of cultural tools. These symbolic mediational tools are culturally specific and can be metaphors, reflective dialogue with self or others, narrative/text, or other symbolic systems (Shepel, 1999). A major finding in this research is that corporate trainers seemed to favour the use of internal dialogue as a mediational tool. Other tools, such as external dialogue, text, or other symbolic systems, were used infrequently.

Can instructing corporate trainers on the use of other mediational tools enhance their reflection and improve their practice as a result? There is evidence in the literature that it can. In this section, I argue that reflective writing, reflection with a mentor, and co-teaching are three ways to enhance the mediational tools used by corporate trainers in their practice of reflection.

Reflective Writing

Idris described writing as a "remarkable" tool that allows the "brain to slow down" and think of problems from different perspectives. A broad set of literature agrees with this sentiment as reflective writing is perhaps the most established component that is central to the notion of learning from experience (Jasper, 2016). As practitioners put down onto paper various thoughts and reflections, they can find themselves constructing deeper meanings and subsequently, greater learning (Boud, 2001).

According to Mezirow (1997), reflective writing promotes transformative learning, which can lead to enhanced professional development. This is supported by Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019) whose research examined how teachers can improve the process of reflective thinking through writing. Based on their findings, they argued that introducing writing as a mediational means improved the process of reflective thinking, as "text offers objectified ideas and meanings that can be interpreted differently" (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 289). Reflective writing, as a factor within the process of reflection, has a transformative potential (Glaze, 2001), as it can increase the amount of knowledge that can be generated from practice while aiding in the development of analytical and critical thinking (Jasper, 2016).

Given the wide body of evidence for the positive impact of reflective writing, it is surprising that eight of the nine research participants did not use writing as a mediational means to enhance the process of reflective thinking. The following are possible reasons for this gap:

1. Corporate trainers are unaware of the benefit of reflective writing or do not believe that there is value in reflective writing.
2. Corporate trainers do not have the skills required for proper reflective writing.
3. There is no incentive or motivation for regular reflective writing.

Gaps one and two can be addressed through a workshop that includes guidance, prompts, and examples of reflective writing to illustrate what is expected. In their research on reflection, Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019) found that the act of reflective writing did not emerge organically, but was rather formally taught in the course of teachers' professional development. A reflective writing workshop could therefore include the results of their findings that using writing as a mediational means not only improved the reflection process, but also provided teachers with a tool to enhance how they communicate with their colleagues about their practice (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019).

The third gap is harder to address. One possible way is to require corporate trainers to keep a reflective journal that they update at least once a week, which can help establish a habit of reflective practice. However, this might be viewed as an additional administrative burden. Rami commented on this by stating that he would not adhere to such a requirement given his already overloaded schedule. Another possible action would be recognising corporate trainers who engage in reflective writing and discussing how their reflective journals have aided in their professional development. More research on how to encourage corporate trainers to keep reflective journals is needed.

Mentorship Programme

As discussed in section 6.2.6, participants appeared to view reflection through an individual centric lens. In all interviews, the words "self", "individual", and "personal" were repeated frequently, as it seemed that reflection was thought of as a personal tool that is mainly used for self-development. While individual reflection has its merits, constant reflection through this sole lens can lead reflectors to cling to their own individual assumptions. Brookfield (1998) warned that "very few of us can get very far doing this on our own" (p. 197) and argued that professionals must constantly revisit their assumptions by viewing their practice through various lenses, including the lens of their colleagues. For Brookfield, colleagues can highlight hidden habits and provide different solutions to issues within the workplace. Reflective duologues can also help individuals obtain a deeper understanding of the issue under discussion, as colleagues can provide different perspectives and recognise alternative courses of action (Boud & Walker, 1998). In addition, colleagues can help reflectors gain a better understanding of their own thoughts and feelings (Daudelin, 1996) and "develop a more critical and analytical approach to learning" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 3).

How, then, can corporate trainers be encouraged to engage in reflective duologues? Instituting a mentorship programme could be a viable strategy. Jamal indicated that this would be an effective approach due to the individualised relationship that mentors can form with their mentees, enabling the provision of deeper and more constructive conversations. By observing mentees 'in action', mentors can provide a different perspective and help mentees question their assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours. This process can lead to greater self-awareness as mentees gain deeper insight into their own thoughts and actions.

Co-training

Corporate training is a solitary activity. While participants did not comment directly on the individualised nature of their work, they all mentioned that they were solely responsible for what Jamal described as the “three Ds”: Designing a training course, developing the relevant material, and finally, delivering the course.

The isolated nature of corporate training emerged when research participants discussed the challenges they encountered in their profession. For example, Fadi commented on how challenging it was to design relevant instructional material for his courses and discussed the difficulty in keeping up to date with the latest trends in his sector. Fadi did not have any background in instructional design and over the years, developed his own style for developing training courses. Ramsey compared his experience when he first started corporate training to the trauma of learning how to swim, when he was just “thrown into the deep end” and expected to learn how to float by himself. Similar to Fadi, Ramsey had to develop his own training courses with no guidance or input from colleagues.

Even though all research participants worked at the same company, there appears to be an invisible barrier that drove each corporate trainer to operate individually. This is perhaps due to the commercialised aspect of corporate training. Each corporate trainer is a profit centre and is expected to maximise the amount of “billing hours” that he or she charges. This does not leave enough time for collaboration and as a result, learning does not flow from one corporate trainer to another.

Is there a way to increase the amount of collaboration between corporate trainers while taking into account the constraints of operating within a neoliberal structure that focuses on the bottom line? A possible solution to this problem is co-teaching, or in this context, co-training. Co-teaching is a method of instruction in which two educators become jointly responsible for designing, developing, and delivering a course (Chanmugam & Gerlach, 2013). This provides benefits to both educators, as it allows them to have deeper reflective conversations on various topics such as delivery weaknesses, the appropriate educational material to use, and the impact that learning has on the training participants (Chanmugam & Gerlach, 2013).

In particular, co-teaching encourages both educators to engage in a process of dialogical reflection that is a more effective mediational tool (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019). By adding another educator to the process of design, development, and delivery, a supplemental mediational means is introduced to the mix that "helps teachers to reflect not only on the situation, but also on the mediational means they are using" (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 297). This enriches the reflection process, as the interaction between the co-teachers brings out different perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and provides new "stimuli for reflection" (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2016, p. 192).

Anticipating future challenges, the proposal to introduce co-training could potentially encounter resistance from senior managers within corporate training companies who might perceive it as an inefficient allocation of resources, given their emphasis on profit generation. The challenge then, is to convincingly demonstrate that the advantages of co-training can compensate for any perceived redundancy of resources. This could be effectively addressed by illustrating how two corporate trainers working together can halve the usual time required for course development and design. As for delivery, co-training can be limited to a certain number of days per year and can be presented as an opportunity for corporate trainers to learn from each other as part of their continuous professional development.

Enhanced reflection by educators is key to the development of professionals who "are capable of critical inquiry and transformation of their own practice" (Lampert-

Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 297). Reflection can be enhanced by helping corporate trainers master the mediational means they use through improving their reflective writing skills, instituting mentorship programmes that allow them to have deeper reflective duologues, and the introduction of co-teaching mechanisms that can enrich their course design, development, and delivery.

6.4.4 From Individual Reflection to Group Reflection

While interview data indicated the prevalence of a silo mentality in corporate training, most research participants supported the need for developing what Jamal referred to as "communities of practice". To work towards achieving this goal, several research participants suggested the scheduling of group reflection sessions where corporate trainers can collaboratively discuss problems and disseminate best practices. In this section, I elaborate on the benefits and challenges of group reflection within the corporate training context and discuss how to move towards establishing these groups.

The Benefits of Group Reflection

Boud et al. (2006) view reflection as a key building block of the "learning organisation", which is an organisation that has an adaptive capacity to change (Senge, 1997). In these organisations, employees can continuously create, acquire, and transfer knowledge; and therefore, the organisation overall can adapt to continuous changes (Garvin et al., 2008). Research participants felt that group reflection, as opposed to individual reflection, can help upgrade everyone's skills by identifying shared problems and proposing a variety of solutions.

Within the literature, there is a growing body of evidence that points to the benefits of group reflection. Glazer et al. (2004) state that while group reflection helps members explore solutions from different perspectives, it can also help them develop more positive attitudes about their professional struggles. Bindels et al. (2018) assert that group reflection leads to the emergence of collective learning, which positively impacts the entire organisation.

The Challenges of Group Reflection

Glazer et al. (2004) identified several challenges to group reflection. The first major challenge was logistical: finding a common meeting time that worked for several busy professionals proved difficult. The second challenge was the establishment of an environment in which individuals can be open, honest, and vulnerable about their experiences. Establishing this environment requires a high level of trust between members, which can be difficult to achieve, especially if members are not well acquainted with each other or are at different levels of seniority within the organisation and have different power dynamics. The last challenge was the potential for personality clashes, as differences in temperament, communication style, and extroversion could favour certain individuals while ostracising others.

Building Collaborative Reflective Groups

To increase the chances of success, the establishment of group reflection sessions within corporate training must take into account the above identified challenges. The following is a design blueprint for initial collaborative reflection groups:

- The group must be of a relatively small size: including four to six corporate trainers will make it easier to find common times and places to meet.
- Groups should be formed of like-minded corporate trainers who are passionate about the need to share best practices and who know each other personally. This will reduce the potential for personality clashes.
- The group should meet only once or twice a month, and the meeting times should be scheduled weeks in advance.
- As the group meets more frequently, certain “best practices” will probably be identified. For example, how to handle disengaged participants is a recurring challenge for many corporate trainers. Sharing these best practices could encourage other corporate trainers to join. However, membership in this group will always remain voluntary.
- Finding the right person to facilitate initial sessions is critical. Reflection can tackle difficult issues, which may result in a “confrontation stage where confusion and insecurity may prevail” (Korthagen, 2001, as cited in Fazio, 2009, p. 538). Therefore, the initial facilitator should seek to be open, empathetic, and authentic (Glazer et al., 2004). Once group members become more comfortable with each other, facilitation can be rotated.
- Finally, without organisational support, it will be difficult to disseminate group reflection to the larger organisation. To do this, Garvin et al. (2008) argued that organisations must build a corporate culture in which group

reflection is recognised as an essential professional practice for diagnosing and solving problems.

6.5 Discussion Summary

6.5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to provide a summary of the study's results. In the first section I discuss the main findings that address how UAE corporate trainers conceptualise reflection in their professional practice. The second section addresses how UAE corporate trainers engage in reflection. In the third and final section, I summarise my views on how UAE corporate trainers can enhance their reflective practice.

6.5.2 Conceptualising Reflection in Corporate Training

Continuous Development by Learning from the Past, Present, and Future

All research participants were strongly in agreement that reflection is critical for continuous individual development and is used as a tool to learn from experience, improve individual skills, and deal with professional challenges. This finding is in broad agreement with the majority of literature that views reflection as a powerful tool for professional development (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987) and a "key element in learning from experience" (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 100). Reflection is how professionals acquire new knowledge and gain new insights that can be used for practice change (Schön, 1983).

Research participants also identified a temporal component for reflection, as they not only viewed it as a tool to look back on the past or to deal with present challenges, but rather saw it as a way to prepare for the future. Reflection on the past and on the present is a concept that Schön (1983, 1987) identified through the use of the terms reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Finlay, 2008). In addition, several scholars have identified reflection for the future as an important component (Edwards, 2017; Eraut, 1995; Greenwood, 1993).

Reflection Is Autodidactic and Viewed Through an Individual Lens

Within corporate training, reflection seems to be self-taught as none of the interviewees had previously attended a formal training course on reflection.

Rather, all research participants learned how to reflect organically, each according to his own unique understanding and approach. This finding signifies a clear deviation from the practices observed in other professions which view reflection as an important professional development tool that should be taught formally as “the results of explicit instruction seem far more productive than merely advocating reflective practice” (Russell, 2005, p. 199).

In addition, reflection within the context of corporate training seemed to rely mainly on individual initiative with practitioners engaging in it primarily for personal growth. In the interviews, the words “self”, “individual”, and “personal” were repeated frequently, suggesting that reflection was thought of as a personal tool that can be used to improve individual productivity. This has been criticised by Boud (2010) who noted that such an individualistic view of reflection restricts the scope of learning to one's own experiences and perspectives, potentially overlooking broader social, cultural, and organisational factors.

A related finding from this study is the absence of any evidence of critical reflection by corporate trainers. Mainly, corporate trainers were concerned about their individual performance or professional identity. The concerns they raised had more to do with how society affected them rather than their effect on society. For example, research participants spoke about the difficulty in working with disengaged participants and the challenge of working in a multi-cultural setting. However, they did not seem to question why participants were disengaged and how their profession affected society. Brookfield (1998) defined critical reflection as “a process of inquiry involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work” (p. 197). This challenge of assumptions needs to include a better understanding of power while going “beyond individualism or ‘atomism’ to appreciate the significance of the wider social context” (Thompson & Pascal, 2012, p. 322).

The individual nature of reflection, and the lack of critical reflection, is perhaps a result of a culture of performativity, as corporate trainers focus on actions that enable them to meet their performance targets, rather than on actions that result in improving their practice. This is supported by Benade (2012) who cautions that the 21st century learning imperative has morphed reflection into “a techno-instrumentalist view of schooling and education” (p. 337). Similarly, MacRuairc and Harford (2008) warn that reflection has become a part of a performance driven agenda that favours a performativity culture.

6.5.3 Reflection by Corporate Trainers Aligns with the Vygotskian Model

Findings from this research show that the process of engaging in reflection, as described by the research participants, aligns with the Vygotskian model of reflection. While Vygotsky did not specifically use the term ‘reflection’, his work on higher psychological functions includes reflective thinking as a concept (Shepel, 1999). Reflection, through a Vygotskian lens, is a higher psychological function (Vygotsky, 1982, as cited in Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019) that “develops in the course of dialectical, socially constructed, and culturally mediated actions of meaning-making, through the continuous exploration of experience by the agent of the action” (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 279).

Findings show that the process that corporate trainers adopted when reflecting can be represented by a Vygotskian model of reflection. The reflection journey begins on the real plane, as the reflector recognises a deficiency or developmental gap. This corresponds to the findings outlined in section 4.2.1 on the triggers of reflection, which Rogers (2001) described as antecedent conditions. The second step in the Vygotskian model is to transition from the real plane to the ideal plane, where reality can be reconstructed. The third step is for the reflector to choose a set of cultural tools that can mediate the process of reflection. Findings show that while all participants used internal dialogue as a mediational means, the use of other means such as external dialogue, narrative, or text was not common. The fourth step is a modelling exercise in which the reflector can consider alternative actions. The fifth step includes the development of a plan of action, which is followed by the final step, in which the chosen course of action is tested in the real plane.

A main finding from the analysis of reflection through a Vygotskian lens is the tendency of participants to rely on self-dialogue as the main mediational means. While self-questioning can be an effective tool for reflection (Teekman, 2000), self-dialogue alone cannot replace the richness of information added by the use of other mediational means (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019). Supporting this contention, Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019) found that educators who were instructed on the proper use of various mediational tools reported a significant improvement in the reflection process.

6.5.4 Reflection Can, and Should, Be Enhanced

Reflection Awareness Workshop

Since reflection appears to be a didactic process that research participants have developed organically, corporate trainers could benefit from learning more about reflection through a series of awareness sessions. Russell (2005) believes the complexity of reflection has been underestimated and that reflection should be "taught – explicitly, directly, thoughtfully and patiently" (p. 203). This is supported by several authors such as (Etscheidt et al., 2012; Husu et al., 2008; Williams & Grudnoff, 2011).

Enhancing Mediational Means Through Writing, Mentorship, and Co-training

A major finding of this research study is that corporate trainers favoured the use of internal dialogue as the sole mediational tool. To enhance the process of reflection, corporate trainers should be instructed on the use of additional mediational tools such as reflective writing, reflective duologues with a mentor, and co-teaching.

Reflective writing, as an additional mediation mean within the process of reflection, has a transformative potential (Glaze, 2001) as it increases the amount of knowledge generated from practice while aiding in the development of analytical and critical thinking (Jasper, 2016). Lampert-Shepel and Murphy (2019) found that introducing writing as a mediational means improved the process of reflective thinking, as "text offers objectified ideas and meanings that can be interpreted differently" (p. 289).

Reflective duologue is an additional mediational method that can add value. Brookfield (1998) warned that "very few of us can get very far doing this on our own" (p. 197) and argued that we must constantly revisit our assumptions by viewing our practice through various lenses, including the lens of our colleagues. This can be achieved by developing a mentorship programme in which corporate trainers are encouraged to hold reflective duologues with their mentors. Through these discussions, individuals can gain a better understanding of their own thoughts and feelings (Daudelin, 1996) and "develop a more critical and analytical approach to learning" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 3).

Co-training is another way to introduce an extra layer of mediational means to the process of reflection. By encouraging corporate trainers to co-design, co-develop, and co-deliver training courses, a supplemental meditational means is introduced to the mix, which "helps teachers to reflect not only on the situation, but also on the meditational means they are using" (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 297). This enriches the reflection process as it allows the co-trainers to engage in a process of dialogical reflection that is a more effective mediational tool (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019).

Group Reflection

While data collected from the interviews pointed towards a silo mentality in corporate training, participants were unanimous on the need to build what Jamal termed as "communities of practice". A step towards achieving this goal is the facilitation of monthly group reflection sessions in which corporate trainers can discuss challenges and best practices. The establishment of such a group is not a trivial task, as there are several challenges that need to be overcome. However, the entire organisation can benefit, as group reflection can lead to a shared understanding of work practices in which collective learning emerges (Bindels et al., 2018).

In the next and final chapter, I draw together the conclusions of the entire study and discuss its implications and limitations. I end by recommending areas for future research and discuss the impact of this research on my professional practice.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I summarise the dissertation, discuss the limitations of the study, and suggest areas for future research. The chapter ends with a section that discusses how this research has contributed to my professional practice.

7.2 Dissertation Summary

An extensive body of research has noted the importance of reflection as a professional development tool (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987). In recognition of this importance, reflection “appears in virtually every professional training mission statement or policy document as an espoused objective of professional training” (Bright, 1996, p. 163). Reflection has been, and continues to be, extensively studied in various professional contexts such as education, healthcare, and the legal field. However, within the specific context of corporate training, little to no academic research exists on how reflection is understood or if it is used. The aim of my dissertation was to contribute towards filling that gap by researching how a group of nine UAE based corporate trainers conceptualised and used reflection within their professional practice. In addition, my dissertation aimed to discover what actions, if any, could be taken to improve the use of reflection by corporate trainers.

My research was situated within the interpretivist paradigm, as I needed an approach that would allow me to explore participants’ subjective views. Making meaning out of the insights of different people is the essence of the interpretative approach since the interpretivist researcher relies on the views of the participants who are being studied (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). To collect the data needed to address my research questions, I used two qualitative research methods: one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the nine research participants; and an additional focus group with three research participants who were previously interviewed. Lambert and Loiselle (2008) note that focus groups, when combined with interviews, can enhance data richness and contribute to knowledge production and synthesis. Similarly, the use of interviews and focus groups can result in a triangulation of methods that can help develop a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena (Carter et al., 2014). The interviews and focus groups were then transcribed using a denaturalism approach that corrects grammar and removes interview noise such as stutters and pauses (Oliver et al., 2005). The transcriptions were analysed using a thematic approach, which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

In interpreting and constructing themes, I used an inductive/deductive approach. This hybrid approach provides more rigour to the qualitative analysis as results are driven by both data and theories, which allows a top-down and bottom-up approach to developing themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). After several iterative rounds of coding and theme construction, I arranged the data into the following five themes: 1) Operationalising reflection in corporate training, 2) The temporal nature of reflection in corporate training, 3) On becoming a master reflector, 4) Building communities of practice, and 5) The professional identity of corporate trainers. These themes were derived in a way that presents the stories of the research participants as they told them in an organised and coherent manner. Each theme was broken down into three sub-themes to provide more detail on the different aspects that the research participants communicated.

After organising the research data into coherent themes, I then viewed the data through the lens of my theoretical framework, which drew on two sources: Donald Schön’s work on reflective practice; and the writings of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky on higher mental functions. By using the writings of both scholars, I was able to address the tensions I had uncovered in the literature while providing a more holistic view to my research. The application of my theoretical lens resulted in several findings that are structured according to my three major research questions:

1. How does a group of corporate trainers in the UAE conceptualise reflection in their professional practice?

Research participants conceptualised reflection as a tool for continuous development. By learning from past and present experiences, and by thinking about the future, corporate trainers can improve their individual skills and deal with professional challenges. This finding is in broad agreement with academic literature that considers reflection a powerful tool for professional development (Faller et al., 2020; Helyer, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2017; Schön, 1983, 1987) and a “key element in learning from experience” (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 100).

However, several issues emerged from this finding. The first issue was the tendency for corporate trainers to view reflection through an individual centric lens that focused mainly on their own performance. A second issue, which is perhaps related to the first, was the absence of any evidence of critical reflection that included how they, or their profession, impacted society in general. A third issue was the autodidactic nature of reflection, as corporate trainers were not instructed formally on reflection but rather, developed reflection related skills organically. This is perhaps an issue, as other professions have made reflection a formal part of continuing professional development.

2. How do these corporate trainers engage in reflection?

Reflection was described as being triggered by a realisation on the part of the reflector that something is just not right. The next step is a reconstruction of reality, as the reflector understands it. This is followed by an inner dialogue that includes a self-questioning phase. The process then continues with a modelling exercise that takes into consideration various future actions. The final two steps involve the development of a plan of action, followed by testing that action and getting feedback about whether the change had a positive impact.

The process of engaging in reflection, as described by the research participants, aligns with a Vygotskian model of reflection. In this model, reflection “develops in the course of dialectical, socially constructed, and culturally mediated actions of meaning-making” (Lampert-Shepel & Murphy, 2019, p. 279). A main finding from the analysis of reflection through this lens is the tendency of participants to favour self-dialogue over other mediational means.

3. Can they enhance their reflective practice and if so, how?

Within corporate training, reflection can, and should, be enhanced. The first recommended action is the design and delivery of a series of workshops that raises awareness of the professional benefits of reflection and explains how it can be used more effectively. A second recommendation is to encourage corporate trainers to use additional mediational tools such as reflective writing, holding regular reflective duologues with a mentor, and co-training. The final recommendation is an initiative to encourage the establishment of a community of practice. A first step towards achieving this goal is the facilitation of monthly group reflection sessions in which corporate trainers can discuss challenges and best practices.

7.3 Limitations

It is impossible for any study to encompass all aspects of a research area. This dissertation was a qualitative study specific to the context of corporate training within the United Arab Emirates. As such, I make no claims to the generalisability of my findings to all corporate trainers in the UAE nor do I claim that my findings are applicable to corporate training globally. In particular, there were four limitations in the design of this study: 1) sample size consisted of only nine corporate trainers, 2) all research participants were male, 3) all research participants worked for the same UAE corporate training company, and 4) all research participants were experienced corporate trainers with at least seven years of experience.

Regarding sample size, the primary objective in qualitative research is not necessarily to generalize findings to a larger population, but rather, to delve deeply into certain phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this context, sample size is guided by the concept of ‘saturation' which is reached when additional interviews or focus groups yield no new insights (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In my research, despite the seemingly limited number of nine interviews and one focus group, the consistency in participants' responses suggested that saturation had been achieved. This is also supported by Hennink & Kaiser (2022) who argue that saturation can be reached with nine interviews.

Regarding the second limitation, there was a clear gender bias in the research participant sample, as all were male. While this is unfortunate, it is related to the makeup of the UAE workforce. According to World Bank indicators, in 2021 only 16.62% of the UAE workforce were female (World Bank, 2021). This is changing, albeit slowly, as countries in the region “are beginning to witness important shifts in their respective societies [including] the increasing presence of women in the professional workforce" (Buttorff et al., 2018, p. 1). Indeed, the company that the research participants are associated with is currently hiring its first female corporate trainer.

A third limitation of this study was that all participants were employees of the same company, potentially introducing bias into the results due to shared work experiences. However, the research participants' diverse industry backgrounds prior to becoming corporate trainers could offset this to some extent. Finally, all research participants had seven or more years of experience in corporate training. While I would have liked to include the perspective of participants who had just entered the industry, the fact that the research was done at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis made this impossible, as the hiring of new corporate trainers was halted for this period.

7.4 Recommendations for Further Research

In the previous section, I presented the limitations of this study and highlighted that the sample size included only nine research participants who were all male, had seven or more years of experience in corporate training, and worked in the UAE for the same company. As a follow-on to this research, I would recommend a study with a representative sample that includes both male and female corporate trainers with differing levels of experience. Additionally, since this research was conducted in the UAE, it would be interesting to discern if these findings can be replicated in a different geographical region.

A second area of further research pertains to the use of reflective writing in corporate training. There is a wealth of research in various professions on how reflective writing is used, how it impacts the quality of reflection, how reflective writing can be taught, and what reflectors write about. This is perhaps due to the inclusion of reflective writing as a requirement in the pre-service training programmes of various professions such as education, nursing, and medical work. This inclusion means that researchers have access to participants who are required to keep reflective journals. However, as pointed out previously, within corporate training, there is no such requirement. As a result, there are no studies on reflective writing within corporate training. As discussed previously, context is important, and the context of corporate training is different than the context of other professions such as teaching or nursing. Therefore, an additional area of further research I recommend is a study of how corporate trainers can be encouraged to keep reflective journals and if this leads to improved learning.

A third area of further research I recommend is a study on group reflection within corporate training. Research such as this will be able to answer questions regarding how corporate trainers can be encouraged to create collaborative reflection groups, how these sessions should be facilitated, and the link between group reflection and action.

A tangential finding to emerge from this research was that of professional identity within corporate training. Corporate trainers saw themselves as “performers in the spotlight”. This is similar to findings by Lowman (1994) who researched the traits of effective professors and found that “the image of the effective instructor…is one who engages and stimulates students via skill as a dramatic performer” (p. 140). While there is a large body of literature that revolves around the professional identity of teachers and educators, there is no specific research on professional identity within corporate training and if, and how, it differs from other adult educators.

7.5 Contribution to Professional Practice

“The carpenter’s door is unhinged” is an Arabic proverb that refers to experts who proficiently apply their expertise to others but not to themselves. While writing this final chapter, I was mindful of this maxim, as I did not want to become someone who studied reflection, espoused its virtues, but eventually did not apply it to himself.

While a single data point is not generalisable, this journey has taught me about the value of reflection and contributed to me becoming a better corporate trainer. I now keep a reflective journal that I fill out diligently. I also schedule regular “espresso moments” to individually reflect on what happened in the past week, what I wrote in the journal, what I learned, and how I can improve my practice. I have also established a reflective alliance with one of the research participants where we regularly have reflective dialogues. I have also proposed to our managing director the establishment of group sessions in which colleagues can start sharing lessons learnt. The first session was held on 23 March 2023, where together with a fellow corporate trainer, we facilitated a workshop titled “Knowledge session #1: Creating engaging exercises linked to a predefined learning outcome”.

Does reflection really lead to improved practice? In my case, I believe it does. As a direct result of learning more about this topic, I have a better set of tools to deal with the challenges that arise in my profession. Recently, I asked an experienced colleague to help me design and deliver a course on business analytics. After finishing the first session, we had a reflective discussion to identify areas of improvement in my delivery style. Seeing myself through the lens of a colleague, as suggested by Brookfield (1995), produced insights that individual reflection would have overlooked. More interesting though, was what *he* gained from the process. My colleague, a mentor who has 20 years more experience than I have, mentioned how much the co-training process has taught him. The experience provided a great example of the enhanced use of mediational means to improve reflection.

While further research is needed to gather empirical data on whether reflection leads to improved practice within corporate training, and if so how, in my case, the answer is an unequivocal yes.

Appendices

Appendix A: Competences for Corporate Trainers

Profile of an Effective Trainer	
Evaluates effects and impact of training	Reflects on work
Provides positive reinforcement	Listens actively
Questioning skills and techniques	Responsive
Understands adult teaching methods/theory	Confident
Enjoys teaching	Tolerant
Counsels students	Recognises own limitations
Never stops learning	Attends to individual differences in trainees
Enthusiastic	Fosters an environment conducive to learning
Encourages trainees to think for themselves	Encourages open communication
Keeps current with development in the field	Good speaking ability
Uses appropriate training methods	Approachable
Excellent knowledge of the subject	Open-minded
Patient	Professional
Shows empathy	Helpful

Table adapted from Gauld (2015, p. 130)

Appendix B: Interview and Focus Group Themes and Questions

Semi-Structured Interviews

Introduction

- Why (and how) did you become a corporate trainer?
- What do you like/dislike about corporate training?

Effective corporate trainers – Learning and development

- What skills do new corporate trainers need to learn before training?
- Did you receive any training on how to be a trainer?
- How can corporate trainers learn and develop?
- How do you learn and develop in your professional practice?
- What actions do you take to improve and develop?
- Is there a specific approach you to take to teaching?
- How do you think participants learn best?

Reflection

- Do you usually think about previous challenges/events that you faced in training?
- What do you call that process of thinking?
- What does reflection mean to you? How do you define it?
- What is reflection for? What should it be used for?
- What are the benefits of reflection?
- How does reflection work for you? What do you do?
- Can you describe a particular situation where you had to reflect? What triggered it? Where did it lead to?

Focus Group

Corporate training challenges in general

- What are the challenges that corporate trainers face in general?
- What are the biggest challenges you face?
- How do you deal with these challenges?

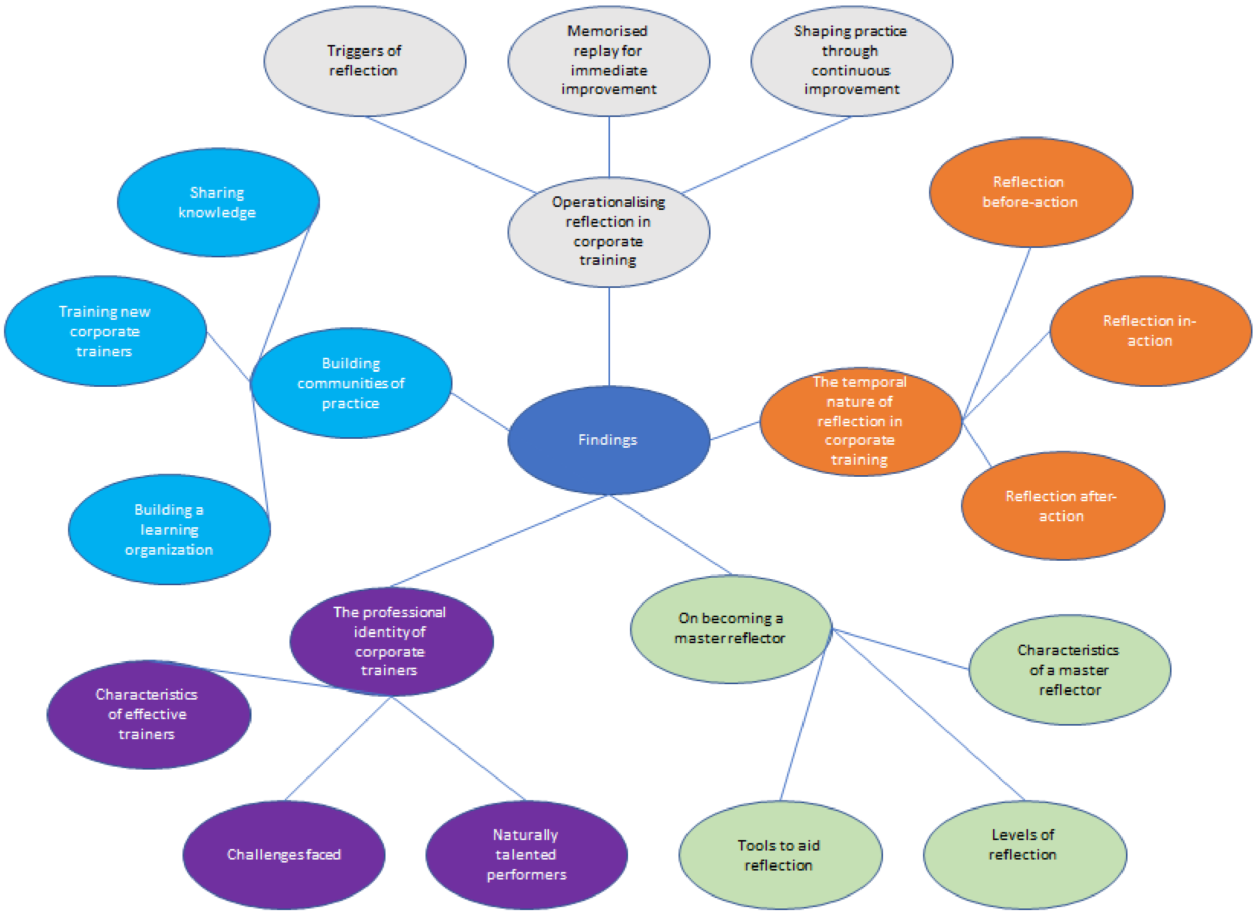
Dealing with challenges

- Do corporate trainers deal with challenges differently?
- How do they arrive at solutions for these challenges?
- Is there a certain method or technique that can be used?

The use of reflective thinking

- Do corporate trainers engage in reflective thinking? (Explain what you mean by reflective thinking.)
- Is reflective thinking part of the pre-training that corporate trainers receive?
- Do you usually reflect on your profession or the challenges you face?
- Are there certain tools or techniques that you use?
- Will other corporate trainers benefit from learning additional tools or techniques?

Appendix C: Final Themes and Sub-Themes



Appendix D: Summary Background of Research Participants

The following table includes a short background of each of the research participants that were included in this study. All participants were included in a semi-structured interview. Three of the participants were also included in a focus group. To retain anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Background
Adam	Male	50-54	Adam has a bachelor's in engineering and a master's in business administration. He has been a corporate trainer for 15 years. His specialty is project management and contract administration.
Chad	Male	40-44	Chad has a bachelor's degree in law and a master's degree in human resource management. He has been in corporate training for seven years and gives training courses in the areas of HR.
Fadi	Male	50-54	Fadi has a bachelor's degree in engineering and a PhD in quality. He has been a corporate trainer for 15 years. His major area of expertise is quality management.
Idris	Male	50-54	Idris has a bachelor's degree in engineering and a master's degree in business administration. He has been a corporate trainer for 20 years. His training specialty is HR and he is also a certified executive coach.
Jamal	Male	40-44	Jamal has a bachelor's degree in international business and a master's degree in educational technology. He has been in corporate training for ten years. His training specialty is HR.
Rami	Male	40-44	Rami has a bachelor's and master's degree in education and a master's degree in human resource management. He has been in corporate training for ten years. His main specialty is HR and interpersonal skills.
Ramsey	Male	50-54	Ramsey has a bachelor's degree in accounting and a master's degree in business administration. He has been a corporate trainer for 15 years. His training specialty is finance and accounting.
Sami	Male	55-59	Sami's background is in HR. He has been in corporate training for over 25 years. He currently gives training courses in the areas of strategy and leadership.
Younes	Male	50-54	Younes has a doctorate in business administration and previously taught university courses. He has been a corporate trainer for seven years. His specialty is in emotional intelligence.

Appendix E: Consent Form and Plain Language Statement

Consent Form

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Consent Form

Title of research project:	How Do Corporate Trainers Conceptualise Reflection in Their Professional Practice?
Name of researcher:	Mohammed Nayal
Name of supervisor:	Dr. Lesley Doyle

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I understand that participants will be not be identified and a pseudonym will be used in any publications arising from the research.

I understand that there will be no effect on my employment with Meirc Training & Consulting arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

I understand that the personal data collected from this research will be stored securely and separately from the research data as set out in the Plain Language Statement.

I understand that the research data that is collected will be stored in a secure location for the period of 10 years from the completion of the project.

- I agree to take part in this research study ☐
- I consent to interviews being held on Zoom if needed ☐
- I consent to Zoom interviews being video recorded ☐
- I consent to face-to-face interviews being audio-recorded ☐

Participant name __________________ Signature __________________ Date ____________

Researcher name Mohammed Nayal Signature __________________ Date ____________

Plain Language Statement

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Plain Language Statement

Title of research project	How Do Corporate Trainers Conceptualise Reflection in Their Professional Practice?
Name of researcher	Mohammed Nayal, m.nayal.1@research.gla.ac.uk
Name of supervisor	Dr. Lesley Doyle, lesley.doyle@glasgow.ac.uk

You are being invited to take part in a research study regarding how corporate trainers use reflection in their profession. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please read the attached information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

Please free to ask me any questions if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Mohammed Nayal

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to explore how corporate trainers understand, conceptualise, and apply reflection in their professional practice. This will help deepen the understanding of the relationship between reflection and professional practice in the corporate training context.

What will I have to do?
If you consent to being a part of this study, you will be invited to an interview to discuss if and how you use reflection in your professional practice (for example in your teaching). This interview will take no longer than 45 minutes. In addition, you may be invited to a focus group discussion at a different date with other corporate trainers to discuss the same topic. The focus group discussion will take no longer than 60 minutes. Interviews and focus group discussions will be conducted in person or using video calling software (such as Zoom).

Do I have to take part?
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

What are the possible benefits for me or others?
Your views are important for understanding if and how corporate trainers use reflective thinking within their professional practice. Your participation in this research study will give you a chance to consider this for yourself and may be helpful in your practice. In addition, the findings from this research can be used to provide recommendations for corporate trainers in general leading to possible improvements in their professional practice.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
Your participation in this study does not involve any physical or emotional risk to you beyond that of everyday life.

What will happen to information about me if I take part?
With your consent, the focus groups and one-to-one interviews will be video/audio recorded to make sure that I have an accurate record of all the information provided. Following these, I will transcribe the data and your name will be changed to a pseudonym. The transcriptions and any notes I make (research data) will be kept in an encrypted, password protected digital file that will only be available to me and my supervisors. This data will subsequently be stored in a secure location for the period of 10 years from the completion of the project, in accordance with the University of Glasgow's regulations.

The personal data that can identify individual names will be stored separately from the research data, also in an encrypted, password protected digital file.-All of the research recordings and the personal data will be deleted at the end of the project.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?
Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University of Glasgow may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies. Confidentiality in focus groups cannot be guaranteed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results of this research study will form the basis of my dissertation that I have to complete as part of the requirements for my Doctorate of Education at the University of Glasgow.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

Contact for further Information
If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer: Dr. Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk.

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