



**THE TEACHER AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER IN  
ELT CLASSROOMS**

- **Dr. K. Thomas Baby**

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**ABSTRACT**

The practice of writing a reflective journal by the students is intended to instil in them scientific temper and to develop their skills for independent enquiry and critical thinking. Writing a reflective journal has been made mandatory in the foundation program implemented by the Ministry of Health Oman. In order to derive the full benefits of reflective learning by students, it is imperative that the teachers should transform themselves into reflective practitioners in the classroom. This paper critically examines the application and practice of reflective learning in the context of the foundation programme and the role of the teacher as a reflective practitioner. Finally, the effectiveness of reflective learning in the foundation programme is analyzed and evaluated by conducting interviews, surveys and by observing learners in ELT classrooms.

**KEYWORDS**

Reflective learning, ELT Classrooms, Teacher, Learner and Practitioner

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Introduction

The practice of writing a reflective journal by the students is intended to instil in them scientific temper and to develop their skills for independent enquiry and critical thinking. At the end of each unit taught in the class, the students are required to reflect on a few critical questions and write down the reflections in their journals. The questions are: What did I learn in this unit? Did I have any difficulty? How Can I improve? When learners try to find answers for these questions, they transform themselves into critical thinkers and consequently begin to figure out their problems in learning. Initiating this process effectively in a class compels the learners to look for and find solutions to their specific learning problems. The process of reflective learning is a cycle which becomes complete only when the teacher becomes a reflective practitioner who can provide answers to the following questions. Have the learners understood what I taught? What are their difficulties? Do I need to change? When a teacher can provide positive answers to these questions, he/she becomes a reflective practitioner who can bring about effective changes in the teaching learning situation.

**Reflective practice** is defined as the capacity to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schon, 1983). According to (Boud, 2010) it is paying critical attention to one's professional activities and examining them reflectively and reflexively to gain developmental insight and modify them for getting better results. It is an important tool in practice-based learning environment where individuals can learn from their own professional experiences by bringing together theory and practice. In this process, a practitioner should take a conscious look at the emotions, experiences, actions, and responses in order to draw out new knowledge, meaning and insight to have a higher level of understanding about the quality and relevance of his/her actions. Several models of reflective practice exist today.

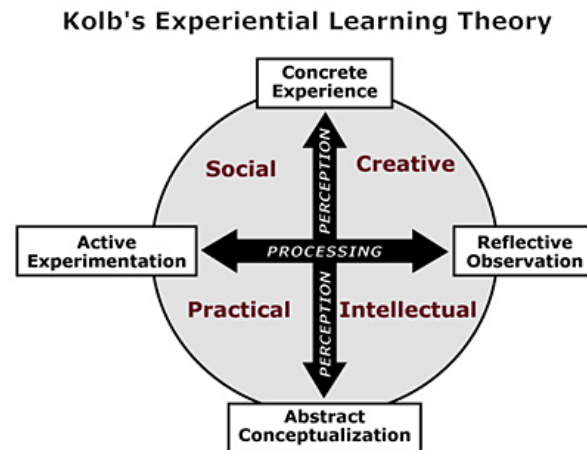
### Development of Reflective Practice

The term **reflective practice** became popular with the publication of the book *The Reflective Practitioner* by Donald Schon in 1983. However, the concept underlying reflective practice was first introduced by John Dewey in his book *How We Think* in 1933. He explored human thought process in terms of experience, interaction and reflection. Another most commonly cited author on reflective practice is David A. Kolb (1984). His book *Experiential Learning Theory* had seminal influence in the development and application of reflective or experiential learning.

Dewey's works inspired Donald Schon to explore the boundaries of reflective practice. Integration of theory and practice based on the cyclic pattern of experience and the conscious application of that learning experience is central to the development of reflective theory developed by Schon. According to Schon (1983) the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning is vital to reflective practice. In order to meet the challenges and improvise professional practice, he introduced concepts such as **reflection on action** and **reflection inaction**. He believed that reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it and evaluate it. Such conscious reflective activity by a professional ultimately leads to better performance or output.

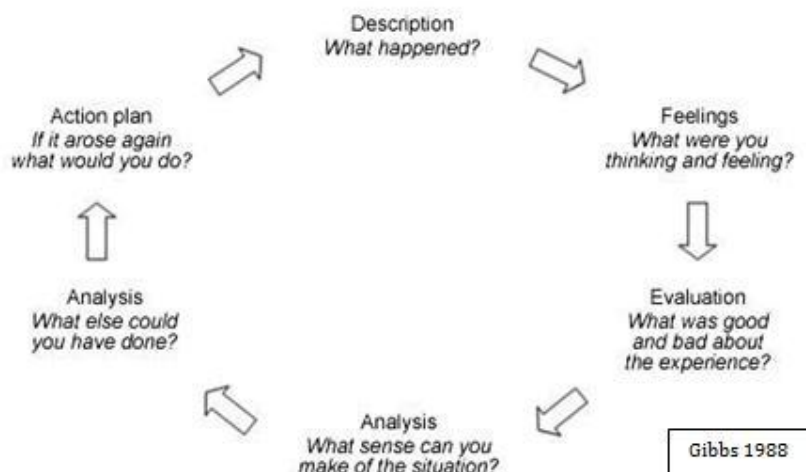


Similarly, David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* (1984) was instrumental in the development of a learner-centred pedagogy which questioned the relevance and validity of formal, intentional teaching learning situation in the traditional classroom environment. Kolb's reflective model highlights the concept of experiential learning centred on the transformation of information into knowledge. It is based on the reflection of experiences in order to gain general understanding of the concepts encountered during the experience and to test these general understandings on a new situation. In this way the knowledge that is gained from a situation is continuously applied and reapplied building on a practitioner's prior experiences and knowledge. Kolb regarded experience as the solid foundation for any genuine learning activity.



Apart from the two prominent models of Schon (1983) and Kolb (1984), the other models of reflective practice that attracted attention are the following:

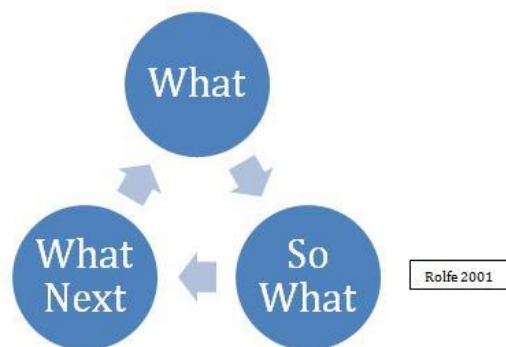
1. **Graham Gibbs (1988).** He discussed the use of **structured debriefing** to facilitate the reflection involved in Kolb's "experiential learning cycle".



2. **John (1995).** His model of reflection provides a practitioner with a guide to gain greater understanding. It is designed to be carried out through the act of sharing with a colleague or mentor, which enables the experience to become learnt knowledge at a faster rate than reflection alone. Five patterns of knowing are incorporated into the guided reflection, having a practitioner analyse the aesthetic, personal, ethical, empirical and the reflexive elements experienced through the situation. Johns' model is comprehensive and allows for reflection that touches on many important elements.
3. **Brookfield (1998).** According to him critically reflective practitioners constantly research their assumptions by seeing practice through four complementary lenses: the

lens of their autobiography, the lens of learners' eyes, the lens of colleagues' perception and the lens of theoretical, philosophical and research literature.

4. **Rolfe (2001).** It is a simplistic cycle composed of 3 questions which asks the practitioner, What, So What and Now What. Through this analysis a description of the situation is given which then leads into the scrutiny of the situation and the construction of knowledge that has been learnt through the experience. Subsequently, the consequence of one's response to the experience is reflected on in order to improve oneself.



5. **Ganshirt (2007).** He proposes the concept of a Design Cycle to describe the repetitive structure of the reflective process. According to him it is a circular time structure which may start with the thinking of an idea that is expressed by the use of visual or verbal means of communication (design tools). The cycle continues through the sharing and perceiving of the expressed idea which progresses into a new cycle with the critical rethinking of the perceived idea. It is pointed out that this concept emphasizes the importance of the means of expression, which at the same time are means of perception of any design ideas. These means or design tools enable and structure the visual and verbal design thinking. According to Wortmann, Ganshirt's design cycle and Schon's reflection-in-action are descriptive models that integrate designing as a spontaneous act and an explicit process.

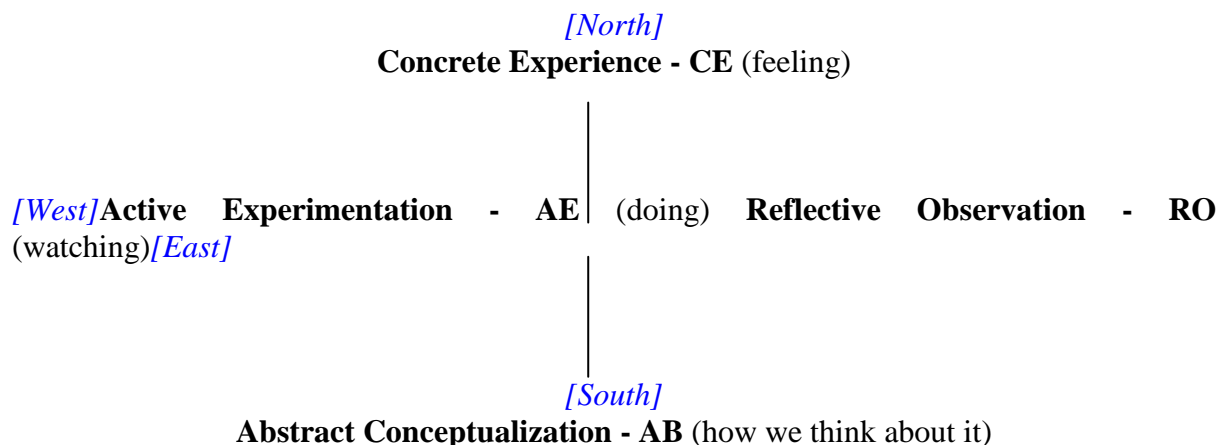
The two prominent models of reflective practices commonly applied in teaching learning context are those of Schon (1983) and Kolb (1984). Reflective Practice has been described as an unstructured approach directing, understanding and learning. It is a self regulated process, commonly used in health and teaching professions. It enhances the abilities to communicate and make informed or balanced decisions. The practice has historically been applied most in the educational and medical field. Atherton (2013) claims that when reflection in action and

reflection on action described by Donald Schon are utilized in practice and when practitioners are able to identify these actions they become better at reflective practice.

Many scholars greatly recommend Kolb's reflective learning model because it embodies clear concepts about our learning behaviour and effective methods of helping others to learn. According to Dennison (2012) David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) has been a leading influence in the development of learner-centred pedagogy in management and business. In his opinion, Kolb's theory is ideally suited for a student-centred pedagogy because it is grounded in reality and liberates the learner from the artificiality of the classroom. Furthermore, it advocated learning from 'experience' and learning by doing. Most of the critics agree that Kolb's model is particularly well-designed, because it offers a direct method to understand students' diverse learning styles. Kolb has indicated that ideally the learning process represents a cycle where the learner 'touches all the bases', i.e. a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Kolb's theory of reflective learning can be explained effectively with help of a simple diagram.

**Concrete Experience - CE** (feeling) versus **Abstract Conceptualization - AC** (thinking)

**Active Experimentation - AE** (doing) versus **Reflective Observation - RO** (watching)



The east-west axis is composed of reflective observation and active experimentation. It is called the Processing Continuum or how we approach a task. The north-south axis known as Perception Continuum is represented by Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization. These learning styles are the combination of two lines of axis (continuums). One line of the axis recognizes a 'grasping experience' (doing or watching), and the other part of the axis recognises a 'transforming experience' (feeling or thinking). The outcome of combining the two opposites on the continuum means that we have a preferred or

dominant learning style. We either study some one's approach and learn from it by watching what happens or, by actively doing in order to test our learning. Therefore, our learning style is a product of two choice decisions based on our grasping experience of preferring to either watch or do, and our emotional response to the experience of preferring to think or feel. In short, the *Experiential or reflective Learning* process advocated by Kolb is useful to learners who want to use direct learning experiences in order to develop knowledge and apply theory in an active and reflective way. Moreover, his theory embodies useful concepts towards an understanding of our learning behaviour and towards helping others to learn.

### **Application of Reflective Learning in ELT classrooms**

Reflective practice is highly applicable in the teaching learning situation because there isn't any perfect model or best approach. The best method is to reshape our future practice based on our past and current teaching experience. In this context, the concept of reflection-in-action and reflection on action developed by Schon is highly useful for teachers especially in ELT classrooms to improve their teaching practices. The reflective learning process begins in an ELT class when students reflect on three simple questions such as: What did I learn in this unit? Did I have any difficulty? How Can I improve? Through these critical questions, the learners begin to initiate the cycle of reflective learning process which can have a meaningful culmination only when the teachers ask themselves three similar counter questions such as the following. Have the learners understood what I taught? What are their difficulties? Do I need to change? According to Larrivee (2000) reflective practice moves teachers from their knowledge base of distinct skills to a stage in their careers where they are able to modify their skills to suit specific contexts and to invent new strategies. The teacher becomes an effective reflective practitioner when he/she finds honest answers for the following questions:

How many of my students have understood the topic?

If only less than eighty percent, what is wrong?

Is it with me and with my methodology?

Is it with the students and their attitudes?

Is it with the surroundings or external factors?

It is imperative that students should develop reflective learning strategies in order to become better learners. Keeping a reflective journal is the first step of becoming a reflective learner. It will help them to recapture their learning experience, think about it and evaluate it (Boud, 2001). The practice of keeping a reflective journal can be done in a variety of ways. There are mainly three different forms of journal writing practice commonly used in reflective learning

1. Double-entry Journal
2. Stream of Consciousness writing
3. Mind Maps (**see Appendix1**)

In order to simplify the procedure of keeping a reflective journal, the students of the Foundation Programme at the Ministry of Health are required to do only subjective reflections on three simple questions based on the learning activity in the class.

What did I learn in this unit?

Did I have any difficulty?

How Can I improve?

The procedure of writing the journal in the class is closely related double-entry journaling style. It is usually done at the end of each class session. Ten to fifteen minutes are allotted for the purpose. At first, the students' responses to the above questions were not clearly defined and focussed as intended. However, the intervention of the teacher through feedback and follow-up mechanism gradually changed the perception of the learners. When students were given specific instructions on how to initiate the thinking process in an analytical manner in relation to their learning activity, they became more aware of the learning process and began to get actively involved in journal writing activity. In order to assess the effectiveness of journal writing activity<sup>43</sup> students of the foundation programme at North Batinah Nursing Institute were interviewed specifically through the instrument of 5 open-ended questions.

1. When do you usually do reflective journal writing?
2. Do you think writing a reflective journal is useful?
3. What are the benefits of writing a reflective journal?
4. What are difficulties in completing the task?
5. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

The result of the interview clearly established that the reflective journal writing activity is done mostly in the class. Only very few participants (less than 3%) said they did journal writing at home. Most of the participants (around 92%) said reflective journal



writing was very useful as it helped them to identify the key concepts and enabled them to figure out further areas for improvement especially through reflection. Less than four percent said it did not help them much in their learning process. Around six percent were not sure of the usefulness of the activity. On the question of the benefits of writing a reflective journal 87% of the participants said that reflective journal writing helped them to reflect on and conceptualize the activities in class. The remaining 13% did not have any specific opinion. 95% of the participants did not encounter any specific difficulty in completing the task. In short, most of the participants agreed that it was very helpful and useful to keep a reflective journal. However, around 20% percent believed that the effectiveness of the task can be affected when sufficient time is not allotted for reflective activity or proper feedback is not given within a specific time period after the completion of the learning task.

### **Survey on Reflective Learning**

In order to get a clearer picture of the effectiveness and relevance of the reflective journal writing, another set of five questions were given to the learners to assess their awareness of the programme and its usefulness in their learning process. These five simple yes/no questions were administered to the same 43 students of North Batinah Nursing Institute who answered five open-ended questions earlier. The following five yes/no questions were designed to arrive at a more accurate data in order to assess the effectiveness of the practice of journal writing.

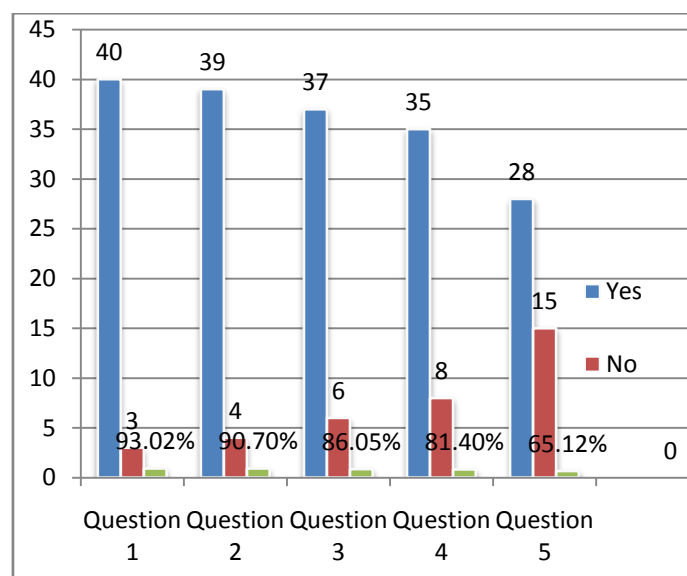
1. Do you know the purpose of writing a reflective Journal?
2. Did journal writing help you to be more reflective in your learning?
3. Did it help you to become more autonomous as a learner?
4. Did it help you to become more critical as a learner?
5. Do you want to continue journal writing in your future learning?

### **Result and Discussion**

	Yes	No	Column1(Yes)
Question 1	40	3	93.02%
Question 2	39	4	90.70%
Question 3	37	6	86.05%
Question 4	35	8	81.40%
Question 5	28	15	65.12%

The above table shows the result of the survey. 43 Students from the foundation course at North Batinah Nursing Institute participated in the survey. The bar chart below shows

an overview of the result of the questionnaire. Almost all the students (93%) were aware of the purpose of writing a reflective journal in class while only 7% of them seemed not to fully understand it. Similarly, More than 90% of the students agreed that journal writing helped them to be more reflective in their learning. Around 10% were not very sure about it. Nearly 86% believed that they became more autonomous as a learner while 14% didn't think so. About 82% of the students claimed that they became more critical learners through writing reflective journal but 18% of them didn't have the same view. Finally, only 65% of them said they would write a reflective journal in their future learning activities, but 35% said they did not want to do it.



The results of the interviews and the survey point to the fact that reflective learning in ELT classrooms brought about an improvement in the quality of learning. In a study by (Cisero, 2006) it is confirmed that reflective journal writing resulted in identifying areas for improvement and helped learners to consolidate what they learned. Some critics like (Tennant, 1997) believe that the concept of stages or steps in the thinking process is a farfetched idea. It is too simplistic and does not go well with the reality of thinking process because in a natural thinking activity a number of stages or steps can occur simultaneously. According to (Jarvis, 1987) empirical support for the model is weak because the relationship of learning processes to knowledge is often problematic.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has validated that reflective learning in ELT classrooms can become effective only when the teachers become reflective practitioners. It can be illustrated with an example from the field of sports as shown by Dennison (2012). According to him sports is a field where experiential learning or learning by doing is the norm. It is learner-centred and success in learning is instantly recognisable by success in competition. Even in such situations, every serious sportsperson would take the help of a trainer. In order to prove this he brings in the example of 'Fosbury flop'. Dick Fosbury who won the gold medal for high jump in the Olympics of 1968 had to invent, perfect and get his 'Fosbury flop' technique accepted. That process was one of true discovery -difficult, lonely and uncertain. Today's high-jumper learns the Fosbury flop much more quickly – it is neither difficult, nor lonely, nor uncertain.

The role of the teacher in ELT classrooms can be compared to the role of an efficient trainer. One role of the sports trainer is to provide informed feedback or the external view to the sportsperson necessary for their improvement. Another more crucial role of the trainer is showing the sportsperson what is involved in the process of learning to win. According to Dennison (2012) when we provide learning situations solely for the discovery of the learner, we are ignoring the advantages of learning situation supplied by the teacher or trainer such as setting the learning agenda, providing efficient feedback to the learner and giving an expert perspective on the learning situation. These three advantages are crucial to success in 'formal intended learning situations' (Jarvis, 2004) commonly present in ELT classrooms.

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## APPENDIX 1

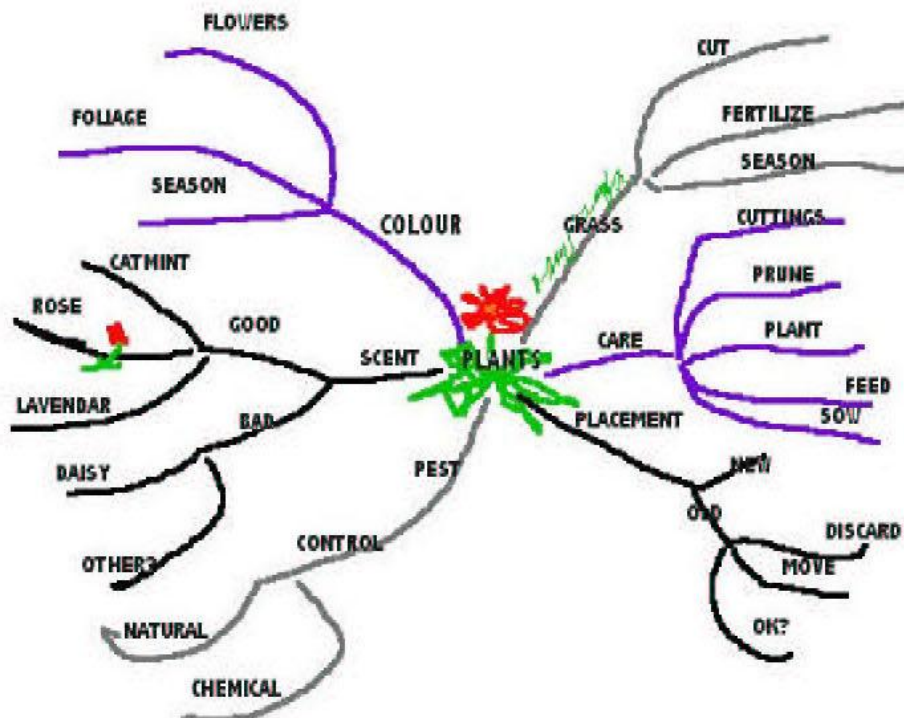
### Sample, Double-Entry Journaling

<i>Objective Summary and Highlights</i>	<i>Subjective Reflections</i>
<p><i>Weisinger, Hendrie ((2000) The Power of Positive Criticism, New York: AMACOM</i></p> <p><i>Chapter: So you're afraid to criticize your boss? (pp. 99-107).</i></p>	<p><i>I am so glad to find this chapter. My boss is always saying she wants feedback, but how can I do this when she has the power??</i></p>
<p><i>This chapter emphasizes that a change in mindset is essential; it is important not to assume that there will be negative repercussions from giving criticism to your boss. Weisinger suggests 3 major ground rules: make sure your boss is receptive, make sure you are criticizing someone to whom you report directly and that your criticism relates to something your boss is doing that affects your work; and make sure you don't get into a power struggle with your boss.</i></p> <p><i>"The point is not to present yourself as a valid source of criticism but to present your criticism as important and valid information" (p. 102).</i></p> <p><i>"Instead of pointing out what your boss is not doing right...., explain to her that you are having a problem..." (p. 103).</i></p>	<p><i>I must say that I found this chapter difficult to read at first because the three key ground rules were not clearly laid out. I had to read it over a couple of times in order to isolate these points. On the other hand, being forced to read it over really helped solidify the ideas!</i></p> <p><i>The three points make a lot of sense to me. I can see how criticizing my boss for taking long lunches would not be appropriate, no matter how much it irritates me, because it does not affect my ability to do my job. It's up to her boss to give this kind of feedback. But, I can give her feedback on the way she assigns me projects. She usually leaves them on my desk with a sticky note saying "urgent". What I need is the opportunity to have a discussion about the parameter of the project, its priority in light of my other work, and a chance to talk about what "urgent" means. I really liked this quote - it helps keep the whole discussion on a more objective level. That's good for me because I've been feeling defensive about this problem.</i></p> <p><i>I do have one concern - the use of the word criticism sounds somewhat negative to me. I wonder why the author didn't use the word "constructive feedback" instead. I think I'll ask the group online what they think of this.</i></p> <p><i>One of the things Weisinger suggests is to make sure you know what you're talking about. I could pull an example of the last project, explain the effect of the request on me, and describe the benefits of having a conversation about her requests. I liked the tips for specific phrases I could use to open up conversations. I can practice privately using these ideas, before I actually approach my boss. Maybe I could say something like, "Meg would you have some time to get together later this week, I'd like to go over the status of the advertising project." Once we're in the meeting, I could say "This project has pushed my other projects behind schedule - I'd like some feedback from you about priorities." Then I could talk about the benefits of this conversation and let her know I'd like to have it earlier the next time.</i></p> <p><i>I still feel a bit nervous, but I have some ideas to play with and I'm willing to give it a try. I'll report back in my next entry</i></p>

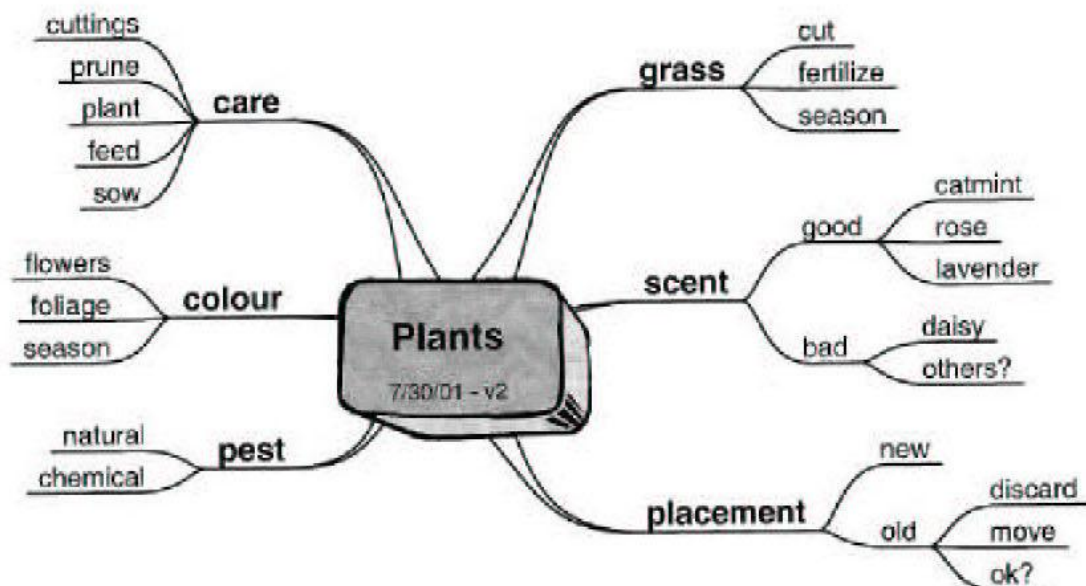
### Sample: Stream of Consciousness Writing

*I wish I didn't have to do this today I can't think of a thing to write down and the sound of the traffic from the window keeps intruding but then the flowers from the window look beautiful I did do a good job with the roses this year must remember to put the manure on in the same way next time and I am looking forward to the taste of my first coffee-mmmm coffee warm and rich and I just have to keep writing here and writing here -well three pages can't take all that long can't see the sense in all of this but guess I'll just do it want to get through them to that coffee waiting there...the chair feels good and so does the the air this morning... Wish I hadn't had that conversation with Jim at work yesterday it worries me.. why I wonder... his attitude bothered me and it made me react defensively.. maybe I'm more upset by my reaction and by appearing foolish. I didn't want things to escalate what can I do? What can I do? I'll have to think on that hope I don't feel a total fool going in to work today. How can I word things to make the essence of what I was trying to say get across /come through rather than getting caught up in some silly emotional over-reaction. Why did I get upset? Why am I dwelling on this? I know I'm new at the job is it because I still feel I have to prove myself and that people there don't realize that I do have good ideas and understand the issues and materials we are dealing with right now? I reacted just like a school child like that time I had the teacher who did not believe in me and kept telling me I was stupid. But I do understand the material and I'm not a child any more so I shouldn't feel so threatened. Maybe Jim's manner reminded me of that teacher He did use some of the same phrases maybe that's it.. He is a bit aggressive but he's not like the total bully that that teacher was... Some of his mannerisms are the same but he's not the same person I must remember that. I think I was frustrated also because I do know the material and when I reacted defensively it was hard for me to get it across clearly. I didn't want to be considered stupid. Let me think of the points I want to make. I'll write them down and think of a way I can express them clearly and calmly. If I take a little time thinking on that before I meet Jim today I should be clearer in the way I speak today. Yesterday caught me off guard and I fell into a knee-jerk reaction but I don't always have to do that do I? If I do that once it doesn't mean I have to do it every time it only means I did that once perhaps I can combine the suggestions in another way just present them clearly and remember that I do know what I'm trying to say. I do have good suggestions and possible solutions -. whew that feels a bit better. Is that a hummingbird over there must remember to fill the feeder so more will come around it's good to look at the bird and the roses before going into work. They clear my head. And this is almost at three pages now what other garbage can I write to get these pages done oh there goes my neighbour out to walk the dog he's very good that way and there it is I've reached the end of the page am done am done am done - until tomorrow*

## Sample mind maps



This mind map was created using kid pix software.



This mind map captures the same information and was created using mind-mapping software called MindManager. This software is available on a 21-day free trial from: <http://www.mindjet.com/> Please note you are entitled to educational pricing if you decide to purchase this software program.

## **ABOUT THE RESEARCHER**



**Dr. K. Thomas Baby**

**Department of Languages & Translation**

**Dhofar University, Salalah, OMAN**

**[kthomasbaby@hotmail.com](mailto:kthomasbaby@hotmail.com)**